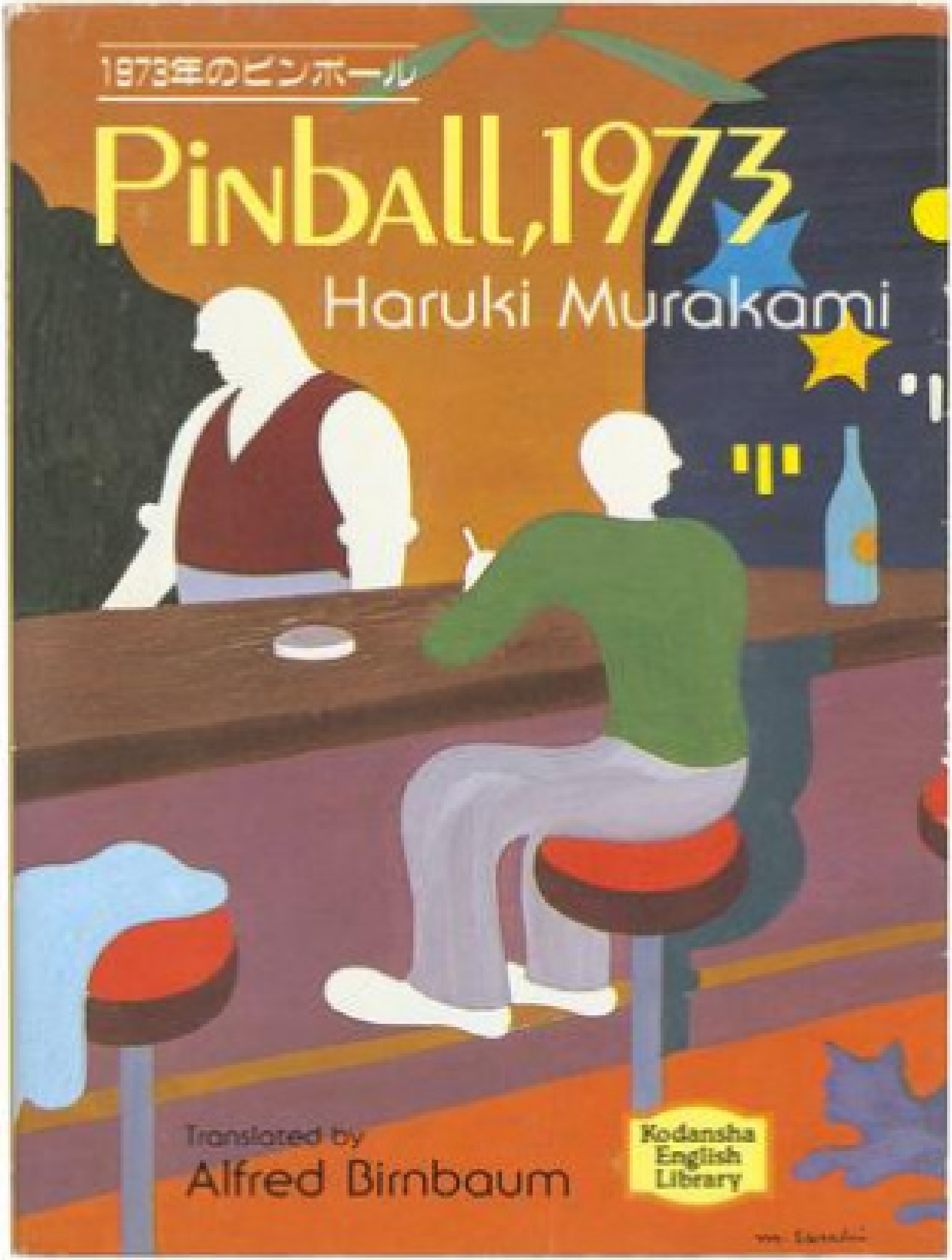
1973年のピンボール

Pinball, 1973

Haruki Murakami



Translated by
Alfred Birnbaum

Kodansha English Library

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Murakami Haruki

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1969-1973

I used to love listening to stories about faraway places. It was almost pathological.

There was a time, a good ten years ago now, when I went around latching onto one person after another, asking them to tell me about the places where they were born and grew up. Times were short of people willing to lend a sympathetic ear, it seemed, so anyone and everyone opened up to me, obligingly and emphatically telling all. People I didn't even know somehow got word of me and sought me out.

It was as if they were tossing rocks down a dry well: they'd spill all kinds of different stories my way, and when they'd finished, they'd go home pretty much satisfied. Some would talk contentedly; some would work up quite an anger getting it out. Some would put things well, but just as often others would come along with stories I couldn't make head nor tail of from beginning to end. There were boring stories, pathetic tear-jerkers, jumbles of half-nonsense. Even so, I'd hold out as long as I could and give a serious listen.

Everyone had something they were dying to tell somebody or shout to the whole world – who knows why? I always felt as if I'd been handed a cardboard box crammed full of monkeys. I'd take the monkeys out of the box one at a time, carefully brush off the dust, give them a pat on the bottom, and send them scurrying off into the fields. I never knew where they went from there. They probably ended their days nibbling acorns somewhere. But that, after all, was their fate.

That was the thing about it. There was so little return on all the effort involved. Thinking back on it now, I'll bet if there had been a World's Most Earnest Listener contest that year, I'd have won hands down. And I'd probably have won a box of kitchen matches.

Among the people who talked to me were a guy from Saturn and another from Venus, one each. Their stories really got to me. First, the one about Saturn.

"Out there, it's . . . awful cold," he groaned. "Just thinking about it, g-gives me the willies."

He belonged to a political group that had staged a take-over of Building 9 in the university. Their motto was "Action Determines Ideology – Not the Reverse!" No one would tell him what determined action. No matter, Building 9 had a water cooler, a telephone, and boiler facilities; and upstairs they had a nice little music lounge complete with Altec A-5 speakers and a collection of two thousand records. It was paradise (compared to, say, Building 8, which smelled like a racetrack restroom). Every morning they'd shave themselves neat and clean with all the hot water they wanted, in the afternoon they'd make as many long-distance calls as they felt like, and when the sun went down they'd all get together and listen to records. By the end of autumn, every member had become a classical music fanatic.

Then one beautifully clear November afternoon, riot police forced their way into Building 9 while Vivaldi's *L'Estro Armonico* was blaring away full blast. I don't know how true all this is, but it remains one of the more heartwarming stories of 1969.

When I snuck past their "barricade" of stacked-up benches, Haydn's Piano Sonata in G Minor was playing softly. The atmosphere was as homey and inviting as a path along a bluff blooming with *sansanquas* bushes leading toward a girlfriend's house. The guy from Saturn offered me the best chair in the place, and poured lukewarm beer into beakers lifted from the science building.

"On top of that, the gravity is tremendous," he went on about Saturn. "There've been chumps who broke their instep spitting out a wad of gum. A r-real hell!"

"Well, I guess so," I prompted after a couple of seconds. By this time, I had command of nearly three hundred or so different small-talk phrases to throw in during awkward pauses.

"The sun's so small, too. J-just one of those things. Take me - as soon as I get out of school I'm going back to Saturn. And I'll start a gr-great nation. A r-rev-revolution!"

In any case, suffice it to say I enjoyed hearing about faraway places. I had stocked up a whole store of these places, like a bear getting ready for hibernation. I'd close my eyes, and streets would materialize, rows of houses take shape. I could hear people's voices, feel the gentle, steady

rhythm of their lives, those people so distant, whom I'd probably never know.

* * *

Naoko often spoke to me about these things. And I remember her every word.

"I really don't know how to put it." Naoko forced a smile, sitting in the sunlit university lounge, elbow on the table and cheek propped up on her palm. I waited patiently for her to continue. As always, she took her time, searching for just the right words.

We sat, red plastic tabletop between us on which a paper cup spilled over with cigarette butts. A high window let in a shaft of sunlight straight out of a Rubens painting, splitting the table down the middle into light and dark. My right hand rested on the table in light, the left in shadow.

The spring of 1969, you see, we were in our early twenties. And what with all the freshmen sporting brand-new shoes, carrying brand-new course descriptions, heads packed with brand-new brains, there was hardly room to walk in the lounge. On both sides of us, freshmen were perpetually bumping into one another, exchanging insults or greetings.

"I tell you, the town is really nothing to speak of," she resumed. "There's a straight stretch of track, and a station. A pitiful little station that the trainmen could easily miss on a rainy day."

I nodded. Then for a full thirty seconds the two of us gazed absently at the cigarette smoke curling up through the beam of light.

"A dog'll be walking from one end of the platform to the other. You know the kind of station."

I nodded.

"Right out in front of the station there's a bus stop and a circular drive so cars can pick up and drop off passengers. And some shops . . . real sleepy little shops. Straight ahead, you run into a park. A park with a slide and three swings."

"And a sandbox?"

"A sandbox?" She thought for a moment, then nodded in confirmation. "It's got one.

Once more we fell silent. I carefully put out the stub of my cigarette in the paper cup.

"A terribly boring town. I can't imagine what possible purpose there could have been for making such a dull place."

"God works in wondrous ways," I quipped.

Naoko shook her head and smiled to herself. It was a sort of straight-A coed smile, but it lingered in my mind an oddly long time. Long after she'd gone, her smile remained, like the grin of the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland. And it occurred to me how much I wanted to see that dog pacing the length of the station platform.

* * *

Four years later, in May of 1973, I visited the station alone. Just to see that dog. I shaved for the occasion, put on a tie for the first time in six months, and brought out my Cordovan shoes.

* * *

Stepping down from the sorry two-car local train that seemed ready to rust up any minute, the very first thing to hit me was the familiar smell of open grassy spaces. The smell of picnics way back when. Nostalgic things, all blown my way on the May breeze. I cocked my head and strained to listen, and I could make out the twittering of sparrows.

Letting out a long yawn, I sat down on a station bench and dejectedly smoked a cigarette. That invigorating feeling I'd left the apartment with in the morning had utterly vanished. Nothing but more of the same, over and over. Or so it seemed. An endless *deja vu*, growing worse at every turn.

There had been a time when friends and I used to fall asleep sprawled out any which way on the floor together. At dawn, someone would invariably step on my head. Then it would be "Oops, sorry," followed by that same someone taking a leak. More of the same, over and over again.

I loosened my tie and, cigarette dangling from the corner of my mouth, I scraped the soles of the not-quite-broken-in shoes on the platform. To lessen the pain in my feet. Not that the pain was all that bad, but it gave me the uneasy feeling that my body was somehow broken into bits and pieces.

No sign of any dog.

* * *

An uneasy feeling ...

This uneasiness comes over me from time to time, and I feel as if I've somehow been pieced together from two different puzzles. Whatever it is, at times like these I toss down a whiskey and hit the sack. And when I get up in the morning, things are even worse. More of the same, one more time around.

One time when I woke up, I found myself flanked by twin girls. Now things like this had happened to me many times before, but I had to admit a twin to each side was a first. The both of them sleeping away, noses nestled snugly into my shoulders. It was a bright, clear Sunday morning.

Finally, they both woke up – almost simultaneously – and proceeded to worm into the shirts and jeans they'd tossed under the bed. Without so much as a word, they went into the kitchen, made toast and coffee, got butter from the fridge, and laid it all out on the table. They knew what they were doing. Outside the window, birds, which I couldn't identify either, perched on the chainlink fence of the golf course and chattered away rapid fire.

"Your names?" I asked them. I had a nasty hangover.

"They're not much as names," said the one seated on the right.

"Really, nothing special as names go," said the one on the left. "You know how it is."

"Yeah, I know," I said.

So we sat facing each other across the table, munching toast and drinking coffee. The coffee was good.

"Does it bother you, us not having names?" one of them asked.

"Hmm ... what d'you think?"

The two of them gave it some thought.

"Well, if you simply must have names for us, choose something that seems to fit," proposed the other.

"Call us whatever you like."

The girls always took turns speaking. It was like an FM stereo check, and made my head even worse.

"For instance?" I asked.

"Left and Right," said one.

"Vertical and Horizontal," said the other.

"Up and Down."

"Front and Back."

"East and West."

"Entrance and Exit," I managed to get in, not to be outdone. The two of them looked at each other and laughed contentedly.

* * *

Where there's an entrance, there's got to be an exit. Most things work that way. Public mailboxes, vacuum cleaners, zoos, plastic condiment squeeze bottles. Of course, there are things that don't. For example, mousetraps.

* * *

I once set a mousetrap under my apartment sink. I used peppermint gum for bait. After scouring the entire apartment, that was the only thing approaching food I could find. I found it in the pocket of my winter coat, along with a movie ticket stub.

By the third morning, a tiny mouse had flirted with fate. Still very young, the mouse was the color of those cashmere sweaters you see piled up in London duty-free shops. It was maybe fifteen or sixteen in human years. A tender age. A bitten-off piece of gum lay under its paws.

I had no idea what to do with the thing now that I'd caught it. Hind leg still pinned under the spring wire, the mouse died on the fourth morning.

Seeing it lying there taught me a lesson. Everything needs an entrance and exit. That's about the size of it.

* * *

Skirting the hills, the tracks ran so straight they seemed ruled. Far ahead you could see woods, like little wads of dull green paper. The rails glinted in the sun, merging into the green distance. No matter how far you went, the same scenery would go on forever. A depressing thought if there ever was one. Give me a subway any day.

I finished my cigarette, then stretched a bit, looking up at the sky. It had been a long time since I'd really looked at the sky. Or rather, it had been a long time since I'd tried to take a good look at anything.

Not a cloud in the sky. Moreover, the whole of it was veiled in that languid opaqueness unique to spring. From above, the blue was making a noble effort to penetrate that intangible veil, as sunlight silently sifted down like fine dust from the atmosphere, and unnoticed by anyone, seemed to form a layer over the ground.

Light was swaying in the warm breeze. The air flowed as easily as a flock of birds flitting among the trees, grouping to take flight. It glided down the gentle green slope alongside the tracks, crossed over, and slipped through the woods, hardly stirring a single leaf. The call of a cuckoo rang out straight across the softly luminous scene, the echo disappearing over the ridge. A succession of hills rose and fell, like sleepy giant cats curled in the pooled sunlight of time.

* * *

The pain in my foot grew still worse.

* * *

So let me tell you something about this well.

Naoko had moved to the area when she was twelve. 1961. The year Ricky Nelson sang "Hello Mary Lou." It was a peaceful green valley at the time, not a single thing to claim your attention. A handful of farmhouses with a few fields, a stream full of crayfish, a one-track local railroad, barely a yawn of a train station, that was it. Most farmhouses had persimmon trees planted in the yard, and weather-beaten old barns standing to one side – or rather, tottering and ready to fall apart. And there were those cheap tin signs advertising tissue paper or soap nailed on barn walls that faced the tracks. The place really was like that. Not even a dog anywhere, Naoko had said.

The house she moved into was a two-story Western-style villa built sometime around the Korean War. Nothing very spacious, mind you, but the sturdy post timbers and quality lumber chosen for each part gave the house a comfortably solid look. The exterior, painted in three shades of green, had faded handsomely in the sun and wind and rain to blend in perfectly with the surrounding countryside. There was a huge yard, and in it several stands of trees and a small pond. In among the trees was a quaint little octagonal arbor that had been used as a studio, its bay windows hung with lace curtains faded to a nondescript color. Down by the pond, daffodils were in riotous bloom, and every morning birds came to bathe.

The first owner of the house, who was also its designer, had been an elderly oil painter, but his lungs gave out on him and he died the winter before Naoko moved in. That was in 1960, the year Bobby Vee sang "Red Rubber Ball." It had been an awfully rainy winter that year. Snow hardly ever fell in these parts; instead you got a freezing-cold rain. The rain soaked into the ground, stinging the topsoil with a damp chill. But deeper down, it made for a table of sweet groundwater.

Five minutes' walk along the tracks from the station lived a well-digger. There in the dank bottom land by the stream, summers brought hordes of mosquitoes and frogs in around the house. The well-digger was a difficult, ill-natured man of fifty or so, but when it came to digging wells he was a bona fide genius. When hired to dig a well, he'd first spend a couple of days just walking around the site muttering to himself as he sniffed handfuls of

dirt he'd scoop up here and there. Then, when he'd found some spot that agreed with him, he'd call in some co-workers, and they'd dig straight down.

That's why people hereabouts could drink sweet well water to their heart's content. The water was cool, and so crystal clear you'd almost swear there wasn't a glass in your hand. Some folks claimed the water came from the melting snows of Mt. Fuji, but that was impossible. No way it could come that far.

The autumn of Naoko's seventeenth year, the well-digger was killed by a train. A driving downpour and cold *sake* and a hearing problem were to blame. Several thousand chunks of his body were strewn over the fields. Five buckets' worth were collected while seven policemen with spiked prods fended off a pack of hungry dogs. Even so, a whole bucketful of the stuff got spilled into a pond. Fish bait.

The well-digger had two sons, both of whom left the area without following in his footsteps. Nobody went near his house after that, and abandoned, it slowly but surely rotted out. And ever since, sweetwater wells have been hard to come by in the area.

I like wells, though. Every time I see a well, I can't resist tossing a rock in. There's nothing as soothing as the sound of a pebble hitting the water in a deep well.

* * *

It was all her father's doing that Naoko's family moved into the area in 1961. He had been a close friend of the dead painter, not to mention, of course, that her father liked the place.

He apparently had been a well-respected scholar of French literature, when all of a sudden, while Naoko was still in elementary school, he quit the university and thereafter spent his time leisurely translating curious old texts and the like. Fallen angels and debauched priests, diabolists, vampires, tracts on sordid and sundry topics. I don't really know the details. Only once did I come across his photograph, in a magazine. According to Naoko, he'd

led something of a colorful and offbeat life in his youth, and the photograph betrayed more than a hint of that style about him. In it he wore a hunting cap and black-rimmed glasses, his piercing gaze focused a few feet above the camera. He must have seen something.

* * *

Back around the time Naoko and her family moved in, something of a colony of these cultured eccentrics had congregated in the area. By all accounts, it had been like one of the Siberian penal colonies for exiled ideological criminals in Imperial Russia.

I've read a little about those penal colonies in Trotsky's memoirs, but for some reason, the only passages I remember clearly had to do with cockroaches and reindeer. So here goes about the reindeer.

It seems Trotsky escaped from a penal colony under cover of night by stealing a reindeer sleigh. The four reindeer raced headlong across the silver expanse of frozen tundra, their breaths turning to white mist in the cold air, their hooves churning up the virgin snow. Two days later when they reached a train station, the reindeer keeled over from exhaustion, never to get up again. Trotsky hugged the dead reindeer and made a vow, tears streaming from his eyes. Whatever it takes, said he, I'll bring justice and ideals, and above all, revolution to the nation.

And to this very day, standing in Red Square is a bronze statue of the four reindeer. One facing east, one north, one west, and one south. Even Stalin couldn't bring himself to tear down these reindeer. Visitors to Moscow should be sure to go to Red Square early Saturday mornings. That's when rosy-cheeked middle school children come out, breaths all white in the cold, and mop down the reindeer.

But to continue about the local colony: The group purposely avoided the more accessible flatland near the station, choosing instead places back in the foothills to build their dream houses. Each and every one of these had incredibly spacious grounds, with ponds and hillocks and whole groves of trees left intact within their boundaries. One estate even had its own brook teeming with real live sweetfish.

These free spirits would wake to the early morning cooing of turtle doves, tread on beechnuts while strolling the gardens, stop to take in the morning light cascading through the leaves.

But times changed, and little by little the exponential sprawl of suburbanization made inroads here. Right around the time of the Tokyo Olympics. The vast acreage of mulberries that once spread out below the hills like a fertile sea was bulldozed into a dark, scarred wasteland, which gradually took the shape of your regular tract town, fanning out from the station.

The new residents were for the most part middleclass commuters. They'd spring up like clockwork at a little after five, have barely enough time to wash their faces before they'd be off to board their train, and return late at night looking half-dead.

Sunday afternoons were the only times they could relax enough to appreciate their new town and homes. Also, as if by consensus, most had dogs. The dogs interbred, and strays were everywhere. That's what Naoko meant when she said there used not to be a dog around for miles.

* * *

One whole hour I waited, and not a dog showed. Ten cigarettes I lit and crushed out. I walked to the middle of the platform, and took a drink of the crisp, cold water from the faucet there. Still no dog.

To the side of the station was a large pond. A long, serpentine pool, as if they'd dammed up a stream. The banks were overgrown with tall marsh grasses, and from time to time a fish broke the surface of the water. Spaced out along the banks sat some men, tightlipped, fishing lines cast into the cloudy water. The lines never so much as twitched; they might as well have been silver needles stuck into the water. Yet there under the lazy rays of the spring sun, a big white dog that one of the men had probably brought along was eagerly sniffing around in the clover.

When the dog came within ten yards of me, I leaned over the station fence and called to it. The dog looked up and gazed at me with the most sorrowful light brown eyes, then wagged its tail a couple of times. I

snapped my fingers, and the dog came over, thrust its nose through the fence and licked my hand with its long tongue.

"Hey, come on in," I called to the dog as it withdrew. The dog turned away hesitantly, then resumed wagging its tail as if the message hadn't quite gotten through.

"Come on in. I'm tired of waiting."

I fished a stick of chewing gum out of my pocket, and held up the wrapper for the dog to see. The dog stared at the gum for a while before making up its mind to crawl under the fence. I gave the dog a few pats on the head, rolled the gum up into a ball in the palm of my hand, and chucked it toward the other end of the platform. The dog dashed off straight as an arrow.

I went home satisfied.

* * *

On the train ride back, I told myself over and over again, it's all over with now, you got it out of your system, forget it. You got what you came for, didn't you? Yet I couldn't get it out of mind, that place. Nor the fact that I loved Naoko. Nor that she was dead. After all that, I still hadn't closed the book on anything.

* * *

Venus is a sweltering planet covered with clouds. Half the inhabitants die young from the heat and humidity. It's a feat just to live thirty years. But by the same measure, that makes them all the more tenderhearted. Every Venusian loves all Venusians. They don't hate or discriminate or hold grudges against anyone. They don't even curse. No murders or fighting, only love and consideration.

"Even if, say, someone dies, we don't feel sad," said the guy from Venus, an ultra-quiet type. "We'd rather just show that much more love while the person's alive. That way, there's no regret afterward."

"So it's like you get your loving done ahead of time?"

"Hmm ... the words you folks use sound so strange to me," he said, shaking his head.

"And everything really comes off with no hitches?" I asked.

"If it didn't," he said, "Venus would be buried in sorrow."

* * *

I returned to the apartment to find the twins in bed, snug under the covers like two sardines in a tin, giggling away to themselves.

"Welcome back," said one of them.

"Where did you go?"

"Train station," I said, loosening my tie, and snuggled in between them. I was bushed.

"What station, where?"

"What did you go for?"

"A station a long ways away from here. Went to see a dog."

"What kind of dog?"

"You like dogs?"

"A big white dog, it was. And no, I'm really not so crazy about dogs."

I lit up a cigarette, and until I'd finished, the neither of them said a word.

"You sad about something?" one of them asked.

I nodded silently.

"Why don't you get some sleep?" said the other.

And so I slept.

* * *

So far, I have been telling this story as my very own, but it is also the story of another guy, whom we'll call the Rat. That autumn, the two of us – he and I – were living nearly five hundred miles apart.

September 1973, that's where this novel begins. That's the entrance. We'll just hope there's an exit. If there isn't one, there wouldn't be any point

in writing anything.

ON THE ORIGINS OF PINBALL

First of all, we'll need to know the name of one Raymond Maloney. It seems that there used to be someone by that name, but he has since died. That's about all there is to know about his life. Which is to say that nobody knows him from nothing. Not any more than they know a water spider at the bottom of a well.

To be sure, it's a historical fact that by this man's very hands the first prototype of the pinball machine was brought unto this realm of defilement in 1934 from out of the great, golden cloud of technology. Which is again the very year that, across that giant puddle called the Atlantic, one Adolf Hitler was getting his hands on the first rung of the Weimar ladder.

Raymond Maloney's life story has none of the mythic color of the Wright Brothers or Alexander Graham Bell. No heartwarming episodes of youth, nor any dramatic "Eureka!" Only scant mention of his name on page one of a strange tome written for a scant handful of curious readers. A reference which may be summed up: in 1934, Raymond Maloney invented the first pinball machine. Not even a photograph with it. Needless to say, we find neither portrait nor statue to his memory.

Now you're probably thinking, had this Maloney never existed, the history of the pinball machine would have been entirely different from what it is today. Or worse, it might well not have come into existence at all. And hence, might not our hasty underestimation of this Maloney amount to the height of ingratitude? Yet if we had occasion to personally examine that very first prototype "Ballyhoo" created by Maloney's own hands, all such thoughts would surely vanish. For there we'd find not one single element to stir our imagination.

The progress of the pinball machine and of Hitler exhibit certain similarities. Both have dubious beginnings, coming on the scene as mere bubbles on the froth of the times; it is through their evolutionary speed rather than any physical stature *per se* that they acquire their mythic aura. And of course, that evolution came riding in on three wheels: to wit, technology, capital investment, and last but not least, people's basic desires.

With devastating speed people kept providing the singularly undistinguished protean machine with ever-newer capabilities. Someone proclaimed, "Let there be lights!" Someone else shouted, "Let there be electricity!" Still another shouted, "Let there be flippers!" And so there came to be lights illuminating the field, electricity to deflect balls magnetically, two flipper arms to whip them back into play.

Scoring came to numerically convert players' proficiency by a factor of ten, while tilt lamps guarded against rough handling and rocking of the machine. Next came the metaphysical concept of sequencing, which led to such variations as the Bonus Light, Extra Ball, and Replay schools. Actually by this time, pinball machines had come to possess a magical fascination.

* * *

This is a novel about pinball.

* * *

The introduction to *Bonus Light*, that exegesis of pinball, has this to say:

There is precious little you can gain from a pinball machine. Only some lights that convert to a score count. On the other hand, there is a great deal to lose. All the coppers you'd ever need to erect statues of every president in history (provided, of course, you thought well enough to erect a statue of Richard M. Nixon), not to mention a lot of valuable and nonreturnable time.

While you're playing yourself out in lonesome dissipation in front of a pinball machine, someone else might be reading through Proust. Still another might be engaged in heavy petting with a girlfriend at a drive-in theater showing of *Paths of Courage*. The one could well become a writer, witness to the age; the others, a happily married couple.

Pinball machines, however, won't lead you anywhere. Just the replay light. Replay, replay, replay .... So persistently you'd swear a game of pinball aspired to perpetuity.

We ourselves will never know much of perpetuity. But we can get a faint inkling of what it's like.

The object of pinball lies not in self-expression, but in self-revolt. Not in the expansion of the ego, but in its compression. Not in extractive analysis, but in inclusive subsumption.

So if it's self-expression or ego-expansion or analysis you're after, you'll only be subjected to the merciless retaliation of the tilt lamps.

Have a nice game.

1

No doubt there are numerous ways to tell twin sisters apart, but I only knew of one. Not only were they alike in every respect, right down to their expressions, voices, and hair styles, but they didn't even have the slightest distinguishing beauty mark or blemish. I was at a total loss. They were perfect copies. Their reactions to any given stimulus were identical; the things they ate and drank, the songs they sang, the hours they slept, even their periods – everything was the same.

The whole situation was beyond me; my imagination couldn't cope with what it must be like to be a twin. I mean, I'm sure that if I had a twin brother, and we were alike in every detail, I'd be really mixed up. Because I'm mixed up enough as it is.

Still, all things being equal, the two girls went about their affairs with the utmost equanimity. As a matter of fact, the girls were shocked when they found out I couldn't tell them apart. They were understandably furious.

"Why, we're completely different!"

"Total opposites!"

Which shut me up. So I just shrugged.

I can't even begin to guess how much time has gone by since they moved into my apartment. The only thing I know for certain is that ever since they'd begun living with me, my internal clock has been running perceptibly behind. It occurs to me that this must be how organisms that multiply by cell-division experience time.

* * *

A friend of mine and I leased a condominium on the slope from Shibuya to Nampeidai and opened a small translation service. My friend's father put up the funds, which is not to say that it took any astounding sum of money

– just the deposit on the place, and the money for three steel desks, some ten dictionaries, a telephone, and a half-dozen bottles of bourbon. We thought up a suitable name, and with the rest of the money had it engraved on a metal sign and hung it out front, then put an ad in the newspaper. After that we waited for customers. The two of us, with our four feet propped up on the desks, drinking whiskey. It was the spring of '72.

After a few months, we felt we'd struck a real gold mine. An amazing amount of business found its way to our humble office. And with our earnings we bought an air conditioner, a refrigerator, and a home bar set.

"We've made it, we're a success!" my friend exclaimed.

It made me all warm inside. Because it was the first time in my life that I had heard such encouraging words.

We even got a rebate from a printer contact my friend had, whom we'd let handle all the translations that needed printing. I'd gotten a university that taught foreign languages to pool some of their better students, and farmed out to them any unmanageable volume of work for rough translation. We hired an office girl to take care of the accounts, odd chores, and messages. A bright, attentive girl fresh out of business school, with long legs and no particular shortcomings, save that (in dull moments) she would hum "Penny Lane" up to twenty times a day. "We sure did right by getting her," my friend pronounced. So we paid her one hundred fifty percent of the normal company salary, gave her a five-month bonus, and granted ten days' leave in the summer and winter. So each of us had every reason to be happy, and we got along famously.

The office consisted of a dining room-kitchenette plus two additional rooms; the odd thing was that the dining-kitchen was in between the other two rooms. We drew straws, with the result that I got the room in the back and my friend got the room nearest the entry. The girl sat in the dining-kitchen doing the books, fixing drinks-on-the-rocks, and assembling roach traps, all to the tune of "Penny Lane."

I purchased a pair of file cabinets as necessary expenditures, and placed one on either side of my desk; the one on the left I piled with incoming material to be translated, the one on the right with outgoing finished translations.

And what a mixed bag of materials and clients it was. Everything from Scientific American articles on the durability of ball bearings under pressure to the *1972 All-American Cocktail Book,* from William Styron

essays to safety razor blurbs. Everything had a tag-affixed deadline – such and such a date – and was stacked on the left until, in due course, it was transferred to the right. Whenever I finished a translation, I'd down two fingers' of whiskey.

One of the great points about our level of translation was that there was no extra thinking involved. You'd have a coin in your left hand, slap your right hand down on your left, slide away your left hand, and the coin would remain on your right palm.

That's about all there was to it.

I'd check into the office at ten and leave at four. On Saturdays, the three of us would hit a nearby discotheque, and dance to some Santana clone between sips of J&B.

The income wasn't bad. Once the office rent, incidental expenses, the girl's salary, the part-time help's pay, and tax percentage were squared away, we'd divvy up the remaining earnings into ten shares, one share going to the company savings, five shares to my friend, and four to me. Our method was primitive – we'd lay out ten equal piles of cash on the table – but it was a lot of fun. It always reminded me of that poker game between Steve McQueen and Edward G. Robinson in *The Cincinnati Kid.*

The five-four split was pretty fair, I thought. After all, it was he who had been saddled with the actual management of the company, and he who would put up and shut up whenever I drank a bit too much whiskey. On top of which, he was struggling along with a sick wife, a threeyear-old son, and a Volkswagen that was in constant need of repair. And as if that wasn't enough, he was forever having some new problem or other.

"What about me? I've got twin girls I'm supporting," I blurted out one day. Not that it counted for much, of course – he still took his five shares and I my four.

So that's how I passed the prime of my mid-twenties. Like so many tranquil afternoons spent basking in the sun.

"No matter who wrote it," boasted the catchphrase on our three-color offset brochure, "there's nothing we can't make intelligible." Every half-year or so, when business fell into a periodic lull, out of sheer boredom the three of us would go stand in front of Shibuya Station and hand out brochures.

How much time went by like that? There I was, trudging on and on through unending silence. When I finished work and went home, I'd drink the twin's delicious coffee, and read the *Critique of Pure Reason* for the umpteenth time.

Every once in a while, things that happened just the day before would seem as far off as the year before, or things from the previous year might come to me like only yesterday. When things got really out of hand, the next year would come to me like yesterday. Either that, or I'd be translating a Kenneth Tynan article on Polanski from the September 1971 issue of *Esquire*, the whole time thinking about ball bearings.

For months, for years, I was sitting there all by myself in the depths of a fathomless pool. In warm water, soft, filtered light, and silence. Silence...

* * *

There was only one way I could tell the twins apart, and that was by their sweatshirts. Faded navy blue sweatshirts with white numerals emblazoned across the chest. One read "208," the other "209." The 2s were over the right nipple, and the 8 or 9 over the left nipple. The Os were sandwiched smack in the middle.

The very first day, I asked the twins what the numbers meant. They told me they didn't mean anything.

"They look like manufacturer's serial numbers."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked one of them.

"Well, it makes it look as if there were a whole batch of people just like you, and you were number 208 and number 209."

"The ideas you get!" scoffed 209.

"Only been two of us every since we were born," said 208. "We were given the shirts."

"Where?" I was incredulous.

"At a supermarket opening. They were giving them away to the first customers."

"I was the two-hundred-and-ninth customer," said 209.

"And I was the two-hundred-and-eighth," said 208.

"The two of us bought three boxes of tissues."

"Okay, I'll tell you what we'll do," I said. "We'll call you 208. And you, we'll call 209. That way I can distinguish between you," pointing to each in turn.

"No good," said one of them.

"Why's that?"

Without so much as a word, they both stripped off their sweatshirts, exchanged them, and pulled them down over their heads.

"I'm 208," said 209.

"And I'm 209," said 208.

I let out a sigh.

Even so, when I was desperate to distinguish the two of them, I had no recourse but to rely on the numbers. I just couldn't come up with any other way to tell them apart.

The twins hardly had any other clothes besides those sweatshirts. It almost seemed as if they'd stepped out for a walk, happened into someone's apartment, and simply decided to stay. Which really wasn't so far from the truth. At the start of each week I'd always give them a little money so they could buy whatever they needed, but other than meals, in fact, they never spent money on anything but an occasional box of coffee-cream cookies.

"Doesn't it bother you, not having clothes?" I asked.

"Not in the least," replied 208.

"Why should we be so interested in clothes?" said 209.

Once a week, with tender loving care, the two of them would wash their sweatshirts in the bath. I'd be in bed perusing my *Critique of Pure Reason* only to look up and see the two of them, naked on the bathroom tiles, washing their sweatshirts in tandem. At times like that, I'd get this really far-away feeling. I don't know why. Ever since the summer before, when I'd lost a tooth-cap under the diving board at the pool, these would come over me from time to time.

Often when I came home from work, I'd encounter the numbers 208 and 209 swaying in the window's southern exposure. Times like that, it was enough to bring tears to my eyes.

* * *

Just why did you choose to descend on my apartment, how long do you both intend to stay, and above all, who do you girls think you are? Your age? Background? Somehow I never saw fit to ask.

And you two, for your part, never volunteered a word.

Our days were spent, the three of us, drinking coffee, walking the golf course looking for lost balls, joking around in bed. Going through the newspapers was the highlight of each day, when I'd spend one solid hour explaining what was going on in the news. The two of them were frightfully ignorant about things. They didn't know Burma from Australia. It took three days to get them to accept that Vietnam was divided in two, and that the two halves were at war. It took another four days to explain why Nixon was bombing Hanoi.

"And which side do you support?" asked 208.

"Which side?"

"You know, North or South?" pressed 209.

"Hmm, it's hard to say."

"What do you mean?" returned 208.

"I mean, it's not like I was living in Vietnam."

Neither of them would accept that explanation.

Hell, I couldn't even accept it.

"They're fighting because they think different, right?" 208 pursued the question.

"You could say that."

"So there's two opposite ways of thinking, am I correct?" 208 continued.

"Yes, but… there's got to be a million opposing schools of thought in the world. No, probably even more than that."

"So hardly anybody's friends with anybody?" puzzled 209.

"I guess not," said I. "Almost no one's friends with anyone else."

Dostoyevsky had prophesied it; I lived it out.

That was my lifestyle in the 1970s.

2

The autumn of 1973, it seemed, deep down, held something spiteful. It was painfully clear to the Rat, plain as a pebble in his shoe.

Even after that year's all-too-brief summer had vanished, as if sucked up into thin air along with early September uncertainties, some small reminder of summer lingered on in the Rat's heart.

There he was, still in his old T-shirt, cut-offs, beach sandals. Back again to J's Bar, where he'd sit at the bar facing J, downing overchilled beers. He'd begun smoking again after five years, and every fifteen minutes or so he'd glance at his wristwatch.

The Rat could almost see the passage of time cleaving away-slice-at intervals somewhere down the line. Why it had to be like that, the Rat could never understand. He couldn't find the severed end. And so he wandered through the dimming autumn twilight holding the limp cord. He cut across grassy knolls, crossed rivers, forced open any number of doors – but the limp cord didn't lead him anywhere. Like a fly that winter has robbed of wings, like an estuary confronted by the open sea, the Rat was powerless, alone. An ill wind had blown in from somewhere, and to the Rat it felt as if his protective blanket of air had been sent sailing clear around to the other side of the globe.

No sooner had one season slipped out the door than the next came in by another door. A person might scramble to the closing door and call out, Hey, wait a minute, there's one last thing I forgot to tell you. But nobody would be there any more. The door shuts tight. Already another season is in the room, sitting in a chair, striking a match to light a cigarette. Anything you forgot to mention, the stranger says, you might as well go ahead and tell me, and if it works out, I'll get the message through.

Nah, it's okay, you say, it was nothing really. And all around, the sound of the wind. Nothing, really. A season's died, that's all.

* * *

Every year it was the same: came that chill time of autumn-going-on-winter, this university-dropout-rich-kid and that lonesome Chinese bartender would be huddled together, just like an elderly couple.

Autumn always hit hard. Those few friends who had been in town for the summer holidays would not even wait for September to roll around before they'd bid brief farewells and be off again to their distant haunts. Ever so subtly the colors changed, as if the summer light had crossed over some unseen divide, and the Rat would note that aura-like brilliance fading away around him. Soon the last breath of the warm dream has seeped away like a stream vanishing into the autumn sands, leaving no trace.

Even for J, autumn was by no means a happy season. From the middle of September on, the number of customers would noticeably dwindle. It was a yearly thing, but that autumn's decline was something to see. Neither J nor the Rat knew what to make of it. At closing time, there'd still be half a bucket of potatoes for fries left peeled and waiting.

"It'll start jumping, just you wait," the Rat consoled J. "You'll be so busy you'll curse your luck."

"Think so, eh?" J voiced dubiously as he plopped down on a barstool he'd commandeered behind the counter and began scraping away with an ice pick at the butter that had dropped on the toaster.

Nobody knew what to expect from there on in.

So the Rat went on thumbing through the pages of his book, while J, between polishing the liquor bottles, would take puffs on the filterless cigarette protruding from his stubby fingers.

* * *

For the Rat, some three years before, the passage of time had begun little by little to lose its evenness. In the spring he quit the university.

Of course, the Rat had any number of reasons for dropping out. The wiring to those reasons had gotten impossibly tangled up, and when things heated up past a critical point, the fuse blew with a bang. Some stayed with him, some were blown clear away, some things bit the dust.

He never explained to anyone why he quit school. It would have taken him five hours to put the pieces in place. And if he told one person, then everyone else would want to hear. Pretty soon he'd be in a real fix, and have to explain it to the whole world. The very prospect was enough to plunge the Rat into a state of depression.

"They didn't like the way I mowed the grass in the courtyard," he'd say whenever further explanation became unavoidable. One coed actually went so far as to go check out the courtyard lawn. "You didn't do such a bad job," she told him when she came back. "Maybe some bits of paper here and there, but..." "A matter of taste," was all the Rat said.

Or when he was in a fairly good mood, he might say, "We just couldn't get along, the university and me," and leave it at that.

But that's three whole years ago now.

Everything passed unbelievably quickly. Until at some point, the entire palette of builtup emotions lost all its color, fading to the meaninglessness of old dreams.

* * *

The Rat left home the year he entered university and moved into a penthouse apartment his father had once used as a study. His parents didn't oppose the move. After all, they'd bought the place figuring to hand it over to their son by and by. Plus they had no real objection to him struggling along on his own for a while.

Nevertheless, no one would have ever said he was struggling, no matter how they looked at it. A melon just doesn't look like a rutabaga. The place, you see, was a truly spacious two-room, living-dining-kitchen layout, complete with air-conditioning, telephone, a 17-inch color TV, bath-and-shower unit, an underground parking space set up with a Triumph, and to top it off, the ideal veranda for sunbathing in style. From his top-floor southeast corner window, he could gaze down on a magnificent view of the city and sea. Open the side windows and the rich scent of trees and the sound of birds chirping wafted in.

The Rat spent leisurely afternoons in the comfort of a rattan chaise lounge. Lazily closing his eyes, he'd feel the gentle current of time flow

through his body like a stream of water. Hours, days, weeks, the Rat spent like that.

Occasionally, though, tiny ripples of emotion would be set off, as if to remind him. At times like that, the Rat simply closed his eyes, sealed off his mind, and sat tight until the ripples subsided. By then it would already be getting a little dark, toward early evening. The ripples gone, that same hushed tranquillity would come over him again, as if nothing had happened.

3

Except for newspaper salesmen, no one ever knocked at my door. So if there was a knock, I never opened the door, never even acknowledged them.

But that Sunday morning the caller kept right on knocking, thirty-five times. Eventually I gave in, dragged myself out of bed with eyes still half-closed, stumbled to the door, and opened it a crack. Standing in the hall was a fortyish man in a gray work outfit, helmet tucked in the hollow of his arm like you'd cuddle a puppy.

"I'm from the telephone company," the man said. "I've come to change the switchpanel."

I nodded. The guy had a permanent five-o'clock shadow, the sort of face you could shave and shave and never get clean-shaven. His whole face was beard, right up to his eyes. I felt sorry for him, but more than that, I felt just plain sleepy. I'd been up until four in the morning playing backgammon with the twins.

"Could you possibly come back in the afternoon?"

"No, I'm afraid it's got to be now."

"How come?"

The man searched through his pants pocket, and brought out a black notebook. "I've got a set number of jobs to do in a single day. As soon as I'm through here, it's off to another area, see?"

I glanced at the addresses in the book, and even though it was upside down I could see that, as he'd said, mine was the only apartment left in the area.

"Just what kind of repair work is it?"

"Real simple. Take out the switch-panel, cut the wires, hook up a new panel, that's it. Be done in ten minutes."

I thought about it a moment, then shook my head.

"There's nothing wrong with the present one," I said.

"The present one's the old type."

"Doesn't bother me any."

"Now, listen," he began, then reconsidered. "That's not the point. That'd only make problems for everyone."

"How?"

"Look, all the switch-panels are linked by a big computer back at the main office. But your switch panel, it sends out different signals from everybody else's, so it fouls up the whole works. Got it?"

"Got it. It's a matter of matching up hardware to software."

"Now that we've got that straight, how about letting me in?"

At which point I decided I might as well open the door and let him in.

Then it occurred to me to ask,"But what makes you so sure the switch-panel's inside my apartment? Shouldn't it be in the superintendent's room or some place like that?"

"Ordinarily, yes," said the man, scanning the walls of the kitchen for any sign of the switch-panel. "You see, most people seem to find switch-panels a real nuisance. They're nothing you'd generally have much use for. They just get in the way."

I nodded. The man got up on the kitchen stool in his socks and checked around the ceiling. Nothing there.

"A regular treasure hunt. Switch-panels get stashed away in the most unbelievable places. It's a crime. And then what do people do? They turn around and fill their apartments with mammoth pianos and dolls in glass cases and what have you. It just doesn't make sense."

I sympathized. The man gave up on the kitchen, and proceeded to stalk through the other room, craning his head into this corner and that, and before I knew it he was opening the door to the next room.

"For instance, take the switch-panel in the last condo I visited. Let me tell you, that was a case! Where do you think they'd shoved the thing? I mean, even I–"

The man's words trailed off into a slight gasp. There in the corner of the room, in that enormous bed, the twins' heads were poking out from under the covers where they lay on either side of the depression I'd left. Dumbstruck, the repairman just stood there with his mouth open for fifteen seconds. For that matter, the twins weren't exactly bubbling with conversation either. I figured it was up to me to break the ice.

"Uh, this gentleman does telephone repairs."

"Pleased to meet you," said the one on the right.

"Much obliged," said the one on the left.

"Well, yes ... likewise, I'm sure," the repairmen said.

"He's come to change the switch-panel."

"The switch-panel?"

"The what?"

"The device that connects our telephone circuits."

Which meant even less to them, so I handed over the rest of the explaining to the repairman.

"Um... it's like this. A whole bunch of telephone lines come together here, okay? Say here's a mother dog and down here are all her puppies. See, you understand, right?"

"?"

"Not a bit."

"Well, uh... so the mother dog looks after her puppies, but if the mother dog dies, then the puppies die, too. That's where I come in, and sort of exchange a new mother when it looks like the mother's going to die."

"That's great!"

"Wow!"

Even I was impressed.

"And so that's why I'm here today. Sorry to have to disturb you."

"Oh, don't mind us."

"No, really, I'd like to watch!"

The man wiped his brow in relief with a towel, and gave the room the once-over.

"Well, now, to find that old switch-panel…"

"No need to make a search," said the right.

"It's in the back of the bedding closet. Just pry up the boards."

I was floored. "Hey, how is it you know stuff like that? I didn't even know that."

"The switch-panel?"

"Common knowledge!"

"That does it," said the repairman.

* * *

Sure enough, the job was over in ten minutes. Meanwhile the twins shared some whispered secret, giggling away, foreheads huddled together. Thanks to which the man bungled the wiring repeatedly. When the work

was completed, the twins wormed into their sweatshirts and jeans under the covers, made their way to the kitchen, and made coffee for everyone.

I offered the repairman a leftover Danish, which he accepted with great pleasure, and ate with his coffee.

"Really appreciate it. Haven't eaten a thing today."

"Aren't you married?" queried 208.

"Oh sure, but my wife never feels like getting up Sunday mornings."

"That's terrible," said 209.

"Well, look at me. You know, I don't work on Sundays because I like to."

"How about a hard-boiled egg?" I suggested by way of consolation.

"Oh, no, no, no... that'd be too much to ask."

"No trouble at all," I said. "I was going to make enough for us all anyway."

"Well, in that case, medium hard-set, if it's, uh, at all…"

The man resumed talking as he peeled his hard-boiled egg. "I've been doing the rounds of people's homes for twenty-one years now, but this was a first."

"What was?" I asked.

"I mean, uh... a guy who's sleeping with twin girls. Bet that must take some doing, eh?"

"Not especially," I said, sipping my second cup of coffee.

"Honest?"

"Honest."

"That's 'cause he's really something," said 208.

"An animal," said 209.

"That does it," said the man.

* * *

I really think that did do it for him. He was so flustered he left behind the old switchpanel. Either that or it was a thank-you gift in return for breakfast. Whatever, the twins spent the rest of day playing with the switch-panel. One would play the mother dog, the other a puppy, chattering some nonsense back and forth incessantly.

I left the two of them to their own devices, while I spent the afternoon finishing up some translation work I'd brought home with me. All the part-time student help was busy with exams and there was no one to do the rough translations, so I had a whole stack of work. It wasn't going badly until after three o'clock or so, when my pace began to drop off as if my batteries were running down. By four, they'd given up the ghost. I couldn't make headway with a single line.

So I just quit. I planted my elbows on the glass desk top, and blew smoke up at the ceiling. The smoke drifted lazily through the tranquil afternoon light like some ectoplasmic form. A small calendar I'd gotten at the bank lay on the desk under the glass top. September 1973 . . . it was more like a dream… 1973; who'd have thought such a year would really exist? And for some reason, there was nothing particularly wrong with thinking it didn't.

"What's wrong?" 208 came over to ask.

"You look tired. How about some coffee?"

The two of them nodded in consensus, then headed back to the kitchen, one to grind the coffee beans, the other to boil water and heat the cups. Then we all plopped down in a row on the floor by the window, and drank the fresh coffee.

"Not going well?" asked 209.

"It doesn't seem to be," said I.

"It's run down."

"What has?"

"Your switch-panel."

"The mother dog."

I heaved a sigh from the bottom of my gut. "You really think so?"

The two of them nodded in unison.

"On its last legs."

"Exactly."

"So what do you think we should do?"

They just shook their heads.

"Don't know."

I took a silent puff at my cigarette. "What say we go for a walk on the golf course? Today's Sunday, so there ought to be a lot of lost balls."

After an hour's worth of backgammon, we climbed over the chainlink fence, and in the twilight strolled on the deserted golf course. I whistled

Mildred Bailey's "It's So Peaceful in the Country" twice, and the twins complimented me on the tune. As nice as this was, we didn't find a single ball. There are days like that. Probably all the players in Tokyo with low handicaps had gotten together. Either that, or they'd begun raising specially trained beagles as golf ball retrievers. We gave up and returned to the apartment.

4

The beacon stood at the end of a long jetty that reached out at an angle from the shore. Barely ten feet tall, the beacon wasn't particularly big. Fishing boats had used its light until the water became so polluted that there weren't any more fish to be had offshore. Not that there had ever been any harbor to speak of. The fishermen had merely set up winches and makeshift wooden frames along the beach as guide-rails for hoisting the boats up onto the shore by rope. Near the beach lived maybe three fishing families, and every day they'd lay out the morning's catch of small fry in wooden boxes to dry in the sun behind the sheltering seawall.

The fisher-folk were eventually driven out because 1) the fish had already gone; 2) local residents had become quite vocal about fishermen not belonging in a residential community; and 3) the shanties they'd built unlawfully occupied public property. That all took place in 1962. Who knows where they went? The three shanties were summarily leveled, while the rotting fishing boats, for lack of any other use or place to dump them, were hauled up amidst a seaside grove of trees and children would play there.

Once these fishing boats were out of the picture, only an occasional yacht would sail close to shore, or perhaps a freighter might weigh emergency anchor in dense fog or during a typhoon warning, but very few vessels ever availed themselves of the beacon any more. And even if they did, there was only an outside chance it would really make much difference.

Weathered to a dark patina, the beacon was molded in a bell-shape. Or else it was a brooding man, seen from behind. When the sun went down, and touches of blue filtered into the fading afterglow, an orange lamp would light up in the knob of the bell and slowly begin to revolve. The beacon always pinpointed the onset of nightfall exactly. Against the most gorgeous sunsets or in dim drizzling mist, the beacon was ever true to its appointed moment: that precise instant in the alchemy of light and dark when darkness tipped the scales.

So many times in childhood had the Rat headed out to the beach at dusk just to catch that moment. Toward late afternoon, as the waves died down

he'd walk along the jetty out to the beacon, counting the weatherworn paving stones as he went. Beneath the surface of the unbelievably crystalline water he could see schools of the slender fish of early autumn. As if in search of something, they'd trace looping arcs beside the jetty, before shooting off into deeper waters.

When he finally reached the beacon, he'd sit down on the end of the jetty and slowly gaze out over the water. Thin cloud trails brushed across a sky of perfect blue as far as the eye could see. A boundless deep blue, so deep it set the boy's legs trembling. It was as if he were shaking with fear. The scent of the sea, the tinge of the wind, everything was amazingly vivid. He'd take his time drinking in the vista, letting it slowly but surely spread through him, then just as slowly he'd turn to look behind him. Now it was his own world he observed, set off utterly in the distance by this depth of sea. Back there, the white-sand beach and seawall, the green pine woods tamped down to a low-lying expanse, and behind that the blue-gray hills ascending skyward.

Off in the distance to the left was a gigantic harbor. He could just make out the massive cranes, floating docks, boxlike warehouses, freighters, and high-rise buildings. To the right, curving inland along the shoreline, was a quiet residential area and yacht harbor, and a block of old *sake* storehouses; then beyond that, the industrial sector lay with its rows of spherical tanks and tall smokestacks, their white smoke drifting lazily across the sky. Further still, for all the tenyear-old Rat knew, you dropped off the edge of the world.

Throughout his childhood from spring to early autumn, the Rat made these little excursions out to the beacon. On days when the breakers were high, his feet would get all wet from the spray, the wind moaning overhead as he padded along, slipping time and again on the mossy stones. He knew that path out to the beacon better than anything. And while he sat there on the end of the jetty, he'd let the sound of the waves fill his ears, watch the clouds and schools of tiny sweetfish, take pebbles he'd pocketed on the way and throw them out into the deep.

Then when dusk began to settle he would retrace his steps, back to his own world. And on the way home, a loneliness would always claim his heart. He could never quite get a grip on what it was. It just seemed that whatever lay waiting "out there" was all too vast, too overwhelming for him to possibly ever make a dent in.

A woman he knew lived near the jetty. Whenever the Rat passed the spot, he recalled that aimless feeling of childhood, the scent of those twilights. He stopped his car on the shore road, and cut through the sparse tract of pines that had been planted on the beach to hold back the sand. The dry sand rasped beneath his feet.

They'd built apartment houses where the fishermen's shacks had been. The canna grass in front of the apartments had, by the looks of it, had the life tramped out of it. Her apartment was on the second floor where, on windy days, a fine spray of sand would pepper the windowpanes. She had a pretty little apartment with southern exposure, but for some reason a brooding air hung over the place.

It's the sea, she said. It's too close. The tides, the wind, the roar of the waves, that fishy smell. Everything.

There's no fishy smell, the Rat said.

There is, she snapped, bringing the blinds crashing down with a pull of the cord. If you lived here, you'd know.

Sand struck the window.

5

In the apartment house I lived in as a student, nobody had a phone. I doubt whether some of us even had one measly eraser. All the same, out in front of the superintendent's apartment we'd stationed a low table lifted from the nearby elementary school, and on that sat a pink pay phone, the one and only telephone in the entire apartment house. So no one gave the least thought to switch-panels or what have you. It was a peaceful world in peaceful times.

There was never anybody in the superintendent's apartment, so whenever the phone rang, one of us residents would have to answer it, then run and call the person. Of course, when nobody felt like getting it (like at two in the morning, for instance), the phone would go unanswered. It would ring on and on (my highest count was thirty-two times), raging like an elephant that knew its time had come. Then it would die. Literally and truly, it would die. As the last ring trailed off down the hall into the night, a sudden hush would fall over the place. A disturbing, ominous hush. Everyone would be holding their breath under the covers of their futon thinking about the call that had died.

Phone calls in the dead of night never brought good news. Somebody would pick up the receiver, and would begin softly. "Can we not talk about this?... Can't you see, it's not like that.... So what, you say? That's just how it's gotta be, right? Guess I'm just tired. . . . Of course, I'm sorry and all that.... So you see... Like I get the picture, I get it, so just let me think it over a bit, okay?... I just can't find the words over the phone..."

Everybody was up to here in troubles, it seemed. Trouble fell like rain from the heavens, and we just couldn't get enough of it. We went around picking up the stuff and cramming our pockets full of it. Even now I can't figure out why we persisted in doing that. Maybe we mistook it for something else.

Sometimes we'd even get telegrams. Four o'clock in the morning a bike would pull up to the entrance, followed by footsteps tramping down the hall. Then there'd come a knock on someone's door. A pounding thud thud that always seemed to announce the arrival of the God of Death. Any

number of people were cutting their lives short, going out of their heads, burying their hearts in the sludge of time, burning up their bodies with pointless thinking, making trouble for one another. Nineteen seventy was that kind of year. If indeed the human species was created to elevate itself dialectically, then that year had to have been some kind of object lesson.

* * *

I lived on the first floor next to the superintendent's apartment, and this girl with long hair lived upstairs by the stairwell. She was the house champion at receiving phone calls, and it somehow fell to me to be perpetually running up and down those fifteen slippery steps. And let me tell you, did she ever get all kinds of phone calls. Polite voices, officious voices, touchingly sad voices, overbearing voices, and they'd all be asking for her by name. I have long since managed to drive that name out of mind; I only remember it was a pathetically ordinary name.

She would always talk into the receiver in a low, tired monotone. A bare whisper of a voice you could hardly make out. She was pretty enough, I suppose, yet there was something dark and moody about her face. We'd pass on the street sometimes, but she'd never say a thing. She'd be walking with such an intense expression she might have been trudging down a path though the deepest jungle astride a white elephant.

* * *

She lived in the apartment house maybe half a year. The half-year from the beginning of autumn to the end of winter.

I'd answer the phone, climb the stairs, knock on her door, and call out, "Telephone!" Then, after a slight pause would come "Thanks." That's all I ever heard her say, "Thanks." But for that matter, I never said anything either except "Telephone."

For me, it was a lonely season. Whenever I got home and took off my clothes, I felt as if any second my bones would burst through my skin. Like some unknown force inside me had taken a wrong turn somewhere, and was leading me off in some strange direction to another world.

The phone would ring. And I'd think, somebody's got something to tell somebody else. I almost never got calls myself. There wasn't anybody who'd have anything to say to me, at least not anybody I'd want to hear from.

Everyone had by then begun to live according to systems of their own making. If theirs were very different from mine, I'd get irritable; if they were too much alike, I'd get depressed. That's pretty much how it went.

* * *

The last phone call I took for her was at the end of winter. A bright, clear Saturday morning, the beginning of March. By "morning," I mean around ten o'clock, when the winter sun cast its clear light into every corner of my tiny room. I vaguely heard it ringing in my head as I lazed about, absently gazing down on the field of cabbages outside my bedside window. Patches of snow here and there on the dark black soil glistened like mirror-bright pockets of water. The last snow left by the last cold wave of the season.

Ten rings and no takers. The ringing stopped. Then not five minutes later it started again. Disgruntled, I threw on a cardigan over my pajamas, opened the door, and picked up the receiver.

"Miss _____, please," came a male voice. A flat, unmodulated voice; an utterly featureless voice you couldn't pin down if you tried. I improvised some reply, then slowly climbed the stairs to knock on her door.

"Telephone!"

"..... Thanks."

I returned to my room, stretched out on my bed and stared up at the ceiling. I heard her come downstairs and start talking in her usual dry whisper. It was a short call as hers went. Maybe fifteen seconds. There was the sound of her hanging up, then silence. Not even any footsteps.

Finally, after a longish pause, I heard the slow approach of footsteps, followed by a knocking on my door. Two knocks, time for one deep breath, then twice again.

On opening the door, I found her standing there in a bulky white sweater and jeans. For a second I thought I'd given her someone else's call,

but she didn't say a word. She just stood there, arms folded tightly across her chest, shivering. She gave me this look – she might have been watching from a lifeboat as the ship went down. Or maybe it was the other way around.

"Can I come in? I could catch my death of cold out here."

Not knowing what to expect, I ushered her in and shut the door. She sat down in front of the heater, warming her hands as she gave the room the once-over.

"Awful empty room you've got here."

I nodded. It was practically empty. Just a bed by the window. Too big for a single, too small for a semi-double. Whatever it was, the bed wasn't something I'd bought for myself. A friend gave it to me. I really couldn't imagine why he'd give me a bed; I wasn't even that close to him. Hardly ever spoke to the guy. The son of a rich family from somewhere, he was beaten up in the school court-yard by louts from some other political faction, had his face kicked in with work boots, almost lost an eye, and withdrew from school. He was in convulsions the whole time I was walking him to the university infirmary, a real sorry sight. Some days later he said it was back home for him, and he gave me the bed.

"I bet you can't even fix yourself anything hot to drink," she said. I shook my head. I didn't have a thing. No coffee, no tea, no *bancha*. I didn't even have a kettle. Just one small saucepan I used every morning to heat water for shaving. She sighed and stood-up saying wait there, she'd be right back. She left the room, and five minutes later returned with a cardboard box under each arm. In the boxes were a half-year's supply of teabags and green tea, two boxes of biscuits, granulated sugar, a thermos pot, and a complete set of dishes, plus two Snoopy tumblers to boot. She plunked the boxes down on the bed, and boiled water for the thermos.

"How on earth do you manage to survive? You're practically Robinson Crusoe here!"

"No, it's not as much fun as that."

"I should think not."

I shut up and drank my hot tea.

"I'm giving you all this."

I choked on the tea. "You're what?"

"You had to answer so many of my phone calls. This is thanks."

"But what about you, don't you need this stuff?"

She shook her head repeatedly. "I'm moving tomorrow, so I won't be needing anything."

I gave the situation a silent moment's thought, but couldn't imagine what had happened.

"Good news? Bad news?"

"None too good, I'm afraid. I'm going to have to quit school and return to the old homefront."

The roomful of winter sunshine clouded over, then brightened again.

"But that's nothing you want to hear about. I don't even want to hear about it. Who'd want to use dishes from someone who left you with bad feelings, right?"

The next day, a cold rain fell from morning on. A fine rain, but it penetrated my raincoat and got my sweater wet all the same. The rain made everything dark and slick. The oversized trunk I carried, the suitcase she carried, her shoulder bag, everything. The taxi driver even growled, Would we be so kind as to not put the luggage on the seat?

The taxi was stuffy inside from the heater and cigarette smoke, and an old *enka* ballad crooned out of the car radio. A real oldie from the days of pop-up turn signals. Groves of leafless trees that might have just as well been undersea coral stretched out their damp branches from both sides of the road.

"You know, from the very first sight of it, I never did like the look of Tokyo," she said.

"Really?"

"The soil's too dark, the waterways are polluted, no mountains. How about you?"

"I never paid much attention to the scenery myself."

She let out a sigh and laughed. "You, I just know you're a survivor."

Her luggage safely deposited on the station platform, this was the part where she got to tell me many thanks.

"I can manage it from here, thanks."

"Where you heading?"

"Way up north."

"Cold, I bet."

"It's okay, I'm used to it."

As the train pulled away, she waved from the window. I raised my hand as far as my ear, but by that time the train had gone. I didn't know what to do with it, so I buried the hand in the pocket of my raincoat.

The rain continued on into the night. I bought two bottles of beer at the neighborhood liquor store, and poured myself a drink in one of the glasses I got from her. I felt as if my body was going to freeze clean through to the core. On the glass was a picture of Snoopy and Woodstock playing atop the doghouse, and over that, this caption:

HAPPINESS IS A WARM FRIENDSHIP

* * *

I woke up after the twins were sound asleep. Three AM. An unnaturally bright autumn moon shone through the window of the john. I sat down on the edge of the kitchen sink and drank two glasses of tapwater, then lit a cigarette on a burner of the stove. Out on the moonlit golf course, the autumnal droning of the insects overlapped in layers across the turf.

I picked up the switch-panel the twins had stood by the side of the sink, and looked it over. No matter how you turned the thing over, front or back, it was nothing but a meaningless piece of fiberboard. I gave up and put it back where I'd found it, brushed the dust off my hands, took a puff on my cigarette. Everything took on a blue cast in the moonlight. It made everything look worthless, meaningless. I couldn't even be sure of the shadows. I crushed out my cigarette in the sink and immediately lit a second.

I could go on like this forever, but would I ever find a place that was meant for me? Like, for example, where? After lengthy consideration, the only place I could think of was the cockpit of a two-seater Kamikaze torpedo-plane. Of all the dumb ideas. In the first place, all the torpedoplanes were scrapped thirty years ago.

I went back to bed and snuggled in between the twins. Their bodies, each tracing a gentle curve, their heads facing outward, breathing lightly, asleep. I pulled the blanket over me and stared up at the ceiling.

6

She closed the bathroom door behind her. Presently there was the sound of the shower.

The Rat sat up in bed, unable to collect his thoughts, put a cigarette to his mouth, and looked for his lighter. It wasn't in the pocket of his trousers on the table. Couldn't even find any matches. He rummaged through her purse, but no luck. He had no other choice but to turn on the room light and search through all the desk drawers, at last coming up with an old book of matches bearing the name of some restaurant somewhere.

Over the back of the rattan chair on which she'd laid her neatly folded stockings and underwear was draped a finely tailored dress of a mustard color.

And on the night table, alongside a lady's wristwatch, was a Baggagerie shoulder bag, not new, but well cared for.

The Rat sat himself down in the rattan chair opposite and, cigarette still in his mouth, gazed absently out the window.

From his apartment up in the hills, he could take in the random scatter of human activity enveloped in darkness below. From time to time, the Rat would put his hands on his hips, like a golfer standing at the brink of a downhill course, and fix his attention on the scene for hours on end. The slope was dotted with patches of houselights, sweeping down in a slow descent that began from below his very feet. There were dark clumps of trees, small rises in the land, and here and there the white glare of mercury-vapor lamps gleaming off private pools. Where the slope leveled off, an expressway snaked through; a waistband of light cinched across the earth, and beyond that maybe a mile of flat urban sprawl stretched to the sea. The dark sea, so obscure you couldn't make out the water from the sky. And out of the midst of that darkness would surface the orange glow of the beacon, only to vanish. Through all these distinct strata descended a single dark fairway.

A river.

* * *

The Rat met her for the first time at the beginning of September, when the sky still held a hint of summer's brilliance.

He had been looking through the local newspaper's weekly "White Elephant" corner in the classifieds. There among the toddler's playpens and linguaphones and kiddy bikes, he found an electric typewriter. A woman answered the phone, her voice very businesslike, "Well, yes, it has been used for one year, but it still has a year left on the warranty. Monthly payments not acceptable. Could you come down and pick it up yourself?" The terms settled, the Rat got in his car and headed out to the woman's apartment, paid the money, took the typewriter. The price was almost exactly what he'd earned working at odd jobs over the summer.

Slender and on the small side, the woman wore a pretty little sleeveless dress. A whole array of potted ornamentals of various shapes and colors lined the entryway. Neat, prim face, hair tied back in a bun. Her age? Doubtless he would have agreed with anything between twenty-two and twenty-eight.

Three days later he got a phone call, the woman saying she'd found half a dozen ribbons for the typewriter, if he'd care to have them. And when he went to pick them up, he'd invited her to J's Bar and treated her to a couple of rounds of cocktails in return for the ribbons. He really didn't get that far talking to her.

The third time they met was four days after that, at an indoor pool in town. The Rat drove her home and slept with her. The Rat really didn't understand why things ended up like that. He couldn't even remember who came on to whom. Maybe it was all in the way the air was flowing.

After a few days had passed, the relationship with her began to swell within him, making its presence known like a soft wedge driven into his daily life. Ever so slightly, something was starting to get to the Rat. Every time the image of her slender arms clinging round his body came to mind, he'd feel some long-forgotten tenderness spread through him.

He got a clear impression that she, in her own little world, was striving to build up a perfection of sorts. And the Rat knew that it was more than your ordinary effort. She always wore the most tasteful of dresses, which never attracted undue attention, and pretty underwear – nothing frilly, but

smart. She put on eau de cologne with the scent of morning vineyards, carefully selected her words when she spoke, abstained from asking superfluous questions, smiled with that "practiced look" she learned from constant scrutiny in the mirror. And each of

these things, in their own little way, made the Rat sad. After seeing her several times, the Rat had guessed her to be twenty-seven. And he was right on the nose.

Her breasts were small, her slender body free of excess flesh and beautifully tanned – though she'd deny having wanted to get a tan, really. High cheekbones and thin lips bespoke a good upbringing and an inner core of strength, yet behind all the shades of expression animating her face, what showed was an utterly defenseless naivete.

She'd graduated from the architecture department of an art school and was working in a planning office, that much she'd told him. Birthplace? Nowhere hereabouts. Came here after graduating. Once a week she'd swim at the pool, and on Sunday nights she took a train to her viola lessons.

Once a week, on Saturday nights, the two of them would get together. Then all day Sunday, the Rat would loll about while she played Mozart.

7

Down with a cold for three days, a backlog of work awaited me on my return to the office. My mouth was all raspy and dry; I felt as if someone had gone over my whole body with sandpaper. Pamphlets and papers and booklets and magazines had piled up around my desk like anthills. My partner came in, mumbled some inquiry after my health, then went back to his own room. The office girl brought in a cup of hot coffee and two rolls as usual, set them on the desk, and vanished. I found I'd forgotten to buy cigarettes, so I bummed a pack of Seven Stars off my partner, pinched the filter off one and lit the other end. The sky was overcast just to the point where you couldn't tell where the air ended and the clouds began. Everything smelled as though someone had been trying to burn damp leaves. Or else it only seemed that way because of my fever.

I took a deep breath, and broke up the anthill closest at hand. Every item was stamped RUSH across the top and marked underneath with a deadline in red felt-tip pen. Luckily, that was the only RUSH anthill. And even luckier, there was still a couple of days left to go on them. The rest had deadlines from one to two weeks later, no problem if I farmed out half of it for rough translation. So one by one I started in on the booklets and brochures, restacking them in the order I finished them. A process that left an anthill of far less stable configuration than before. It looked like a newspaper graph by sex and age of constituent support for the cabinet. And it wasn't just the shape that was strange, I might add; its contents were as thrilling as a crosssection of random topics.

1. Charles Rankin, *Scientific Puzzle Box: Animals.*
From p. 68, "Why Cats Wash Their Faces" to p. 89,
"How Bears Catch Fish."
Finish by Oct. 12.
2. American Nursing Association, ed., *Talking with the Terminally Ill.*
All 16 pp.
Finish by Oct. 19.

3. Frank de Seto, Jr., *Tracing Authors' Illnesses.*
Chapter 3, "Authors and Hay Fever." All 23 pp.
Finish by Oct. 23.

4. Rend Claire, *Le Chapeau de Paille d'Italie,*
English trans. scenario.
All 39 pp.
Finish by Oct. 26.

The real shame was that the clients' names were never written anywhere. I could scarcely imagine who, for any reason, would want to get these things translated (and as RUSH jobs, no less). Perhaps some bear had stopped in its tracks before a stream in expectation of my translation. Or maybe a nurse was waiting wordlessly in her vigil over a terminally ill patient.

Photos of a cat washing its face with its paw lay before me on the desk as I drank my coffee and chewed one of the rolls to a pulp. It tasted like papier-mâché. My head had begun to clear a bit, but my extremities still tingled with fever. I took my camping knife out of the desk drawer, spent forever carefully sharpening six F pencils, then slowly got down to business.

I put on some old Stan Getz, and was at it until noon. The band was top notch – Stan Getz, Al Haig, Jimmy Rainey, Teddy Kotick, and Tiny Kahn. I whistled along with the tape through the whole Getz solo on "Jumping with Symphony Sid" and felt worlds better.

During lunch break I headed out to a crowded little eating spot five minutes down the hill from the office for some fried fish, then stood outside a hamburger stand while I drank two orange juices. Next I stopped by a pet shop, and played with some Abyssinians for maybe ten minutes, sticking my finger through a gap in the glass. Your regular lunch break.

Back at the office, I lazily glanced over the morning paper until the clock struck one. Then I sharpened my six pencils again for the afternoon,

pinched the filters off the rest of the Seven Stars, and laid the cigarettes out on the desk. At which point, the office girl brought in a cup of hot green tea.

"How d'you feel?"

"Not bad."

"And work?"

"Getting there."

The sky was still relentlessly overcast. If anything, the gray had grown a shade deeper than in the morning. When I stuck my head out the window I got the distinct impression it was about to rain. Autumn birds were in flight across the sky, and everything hung heavy with that dull metropolitan drone (a combination of the rumble of the subway, the sizzle of hamburgers, the roar of traffic on the elevated expressways, car doors slammed shut or flung open, countless assorted noises like that).

I closed the window, put on a cassette of Charlie Parker playing "Just Friends," and resumed translating from the section "When Do Migratory Birds Sleep?"

When four o'clock rolled around I wrapped things up, handed over my day's worth of translations to the girl, and left the office. I decided to wear the lightweight raincoat I made a habit of keeping at the office so as not to carry around an umbrella. At the station I bought an evening paper, and was jostled about the better part of an hour in a crowded train. Even the inside of the train smelled like rain, but so far not a single drop had fallen.

It wasn't until I'd finished shopping for dinner at the supermarket by the station that it finally began to rain. Little by little, misty fine droplets you could hardly see turned the pavement at my feet rain-gray. After checking the bus schedule, I dodged into a nearby coffee shop and ordered a coffee. The place was crowded, and everything smelled once and for all like real rain. The blouse the waitress was wearing, the coffee, everything.

As the streetlamps around the bus terminal began to flicker on in the twilight, buses slid back and forth between the lights like giant trout navigating a current. Each bus filled with commuter types and students and housewives; each disappeared into the gloom. A middle-aged woman dragged the dark shape of a German shepherd past the window. School kids went by bouncing a rubber ball. I put out my fifth cigarette, and took one last sip of cold coffee.

Then I took a good, hard look at my reflection in the glass. Maybe it was the fever, but my eyes looked shot. Well okay, we'll disregard that. A

five-thirty shadow darkened my face. What say we let that pass, too. The point is, it didn't even look like my face. It was the face of any twenty-four-year-old guy who might have been sitting across the way on the commuter train. My face, my self, what would they mean to anybody? Just another stiff. So this self of mine passes some other's self on the street – what do we have to say to each other? Hey there! Hi ya! That's about it. Nobody raises a hand. No one turns around to take another look.

Maybe if I put gardenias in both ears, or wore flippers over both hands, somebody might take a second look. But that'd be it. They'd put it all behind them after three steps. Their eyes not looking at anything. Nor my eyes. I felt emptied out, a blank. Would I ever again have anything to give to anyone?

* * *

The twins were waiting for me.

I handed over the brown-paper supermarket bag to one or the other of them, then went and took a shower, a lit cigarette still in my mouth. I didn't even soap up; I just let the stream of water beat down on me while I gazed absently at the tiles. Some flickering movement passed over the wall before my eyes, and was gone. The shadow of something I could neither touch nor bring back.

I stepped from the bathroom right into the bedroom and toweled myself dry before tumbling into bed. The sheets were freshly washed, coral blue, not a wrinkle on them. As I lay there looking up at the ceiling, the events of the day played back in my head. The whole while the twins were busy slicing vegetables, sauteing meat, and cooking rice.

"How about a beer?" one of them asked me.

"Guh."

And the twin wearing the 208 sweatshirt brought a beer and a glass.

"Some music?"

"Would be nice."

She pulled Handel's Recorder Sonatas out of the record rack, put it on the player, and lowered the needle. A Valentine's Day present from a girlfriend a good many years before. The sound of sauteing meat came

through the recorder, violin, and cello like a continuous undertone. My girlfriend and I had often had sex to this record. Even after the record ended, what did we care that the needle was scratching on and on, revolution after revolution? We would still be going at it.

Outside the window, rain was falling noiselessly over the dark golf course. I finished my beer, and by the time Hans-Martin Linde played the last note of the Sonata in F Major, dinner was ready. The three of us were unusually quiet over the meal that night. By then the record had ended, so other than the patter of rain on the eaves, and the sound of three sets of jaws chewing meat, the room was silent. When we were through, the twins cleared the table, and the two of them stood around in the kitchen brewing coffee. Then the three of us drank our hot coffee. Brimming with the aroma of life, that coffee was. One of them got up to put on a record. It was the Beatles' "Rubber Soul."

"Hey, I don't remember buying that record," I blurted out in surprise.

"We bought it."

"Little by little we saved up the money you gave us.

I just shook my head.

"You don't like the Beatles?"

Silence.

"What a shame. And we thought you'd be pleased."

"Sorry."

One of them got up, took the record off, and lovingly brushed off the least speck of dust before slipping it back into its jacket. All the while, none of us spoke a word. Then I let out a sigh.

"I didn't mean it that way," I explained. "I'm just a little tired and irritable. Let's give it another listen."

The two of them looked at each other and broke into a chuckle.

"Don't put yourself out now. It's your house after all."

"No, really, you don't have to put up with it on our account."

"Let's give it another listen."

So we ended up listening to both sides of "Rubber Soul" over coffee. And I managed to loosen up a bit. The twins seemed in particularly good spirits.

After we finished our coffee, the twins took my temperature. Back and forth, the two of them grimaced at the thermometer. One hundred one degrees. Up a degree since morning. I felt light-headed.

"Taking showers like that, worst thing for you."

"You ought to get some sleep."

They were perfectly right, of course. I got undressed and climbed into bed with the *Critique of Pure Reason* and a pack of cigarettes. The blanket somehow smelled of the sunny outdoors. Kant was as brilliant as ever, but the cigarettes tasted like damp newspaper lit from a gas burner. I closed the book, and was half-listening to the twins' voices, with eyes closed, when the darkness dragged me under.

8

The cemetery occupied a good spread near the top of the hill. Narrow gravel walkways crisscrossed between the graves, and close-cropped azalea bushes stood about here and there like grazing sheep. A row or two of mercury-vapor lamps, peering down over the expanse, arched up like overgrown fiddleheads, casting an unnatural white light into every corner of the grounds.

The Rat stopped the car in the woods at the southeast corner of the cemetery and surveyed the night streets below, his arm around her shoulder. All those lights. The whole town looked to have been cast in a single sheet, still glowing warm in the mold. Either that, or a giant moth had just sprinkled its golden dust all over the place.

Dreamily she closed her eyes and pressed against the Rat. From his shoulder on down, the Rat felt the supple weight of her body. An odd sensation, that weight. This being that could love a man, bear children, grow old, and die; to think one whole existence was in this weight. The Rat took a cigarette from his pack and lit up. Every once in a while a sea breeze would sweep up the slope from below and rustle the pine trees. Maybe she had really fallen asleep. The Rat put his hand to her cheek, then touched a fingertip to her lips. He felt her breath, warm and humid.

Somehow the cemetery seemed more like an unfinished housing tract than a graveyard. Over half the plots were empty. That's because the people slated for those places were still living. Occasionally, on Sunday afternoons, some people would drive up with their families to check out their future resting places. Gazing out over the grounds from the stone base already erected on the spot, Hmmm, nice view from here, flowers of the season, good fresh air, lawn looks well cared for, even got sprinklers. And no wild dogs to get at the offerings.

But above all, they'd be impressed by the bright, healthy atmosphere. Satisfied, they'd sit down on a bench to eat their box lunches, and then return home to the day-to-day bustle of their lives.

Mornings and evenings the caretaker would rake the gravel walkways. Then he'd chase away any kids who might have their eyes on the carp in the

central pond. And as if that wasn't enough, three times a day – at nine, twelve, and six – a music-box rendition of "Old Black Joe" would be piped from speakers around the grounds. The Rat could never figure out what possible meaning there could be in playing music, although he had to admit that "Old Black Joe" playing to a deserted graveyard at six o'clock in the waning light was definitely something to experience.

At six-thirty, the caretaker would return by bus to the realm below, and total silence would fall over the necropolis. Then the couples would begin arriving to make out in their cars. Come summer, the cars would be literally lined up through the woods.

The cemetery thus held a place of profound significance in the Rat's adolescent years. Even in high school before he could drive, the Rat was ferrying girls up the incline by the stream on the back of a 250-cc bike. Always staring up at the same street lamps, he'd had himself a whole string of girls. Like so many scents briefly enjoyed before they wafted away. So many dreams, so many disappointments, so many promises. And in the end, they all just vanished.

Turn around, and death had put down roots beneath each plot across the extensive grounds. Occasionally, the Rat would take these girls by the hand and wander about on the gravel paths of this pretentious cemetery. All those different names, dates, deaths, each backed with a past life, were like shrubs in an arboretum, spaced out equidistantly as far as the eye could see. No gently swaying breezes for them, no fragrances, no touch of a hand reaching through the darkness. They who seemed like trees lost to time. They to whom no thoughts occurred, nor would ever have words to get them across. They'd left all that to those who still had some living to do. He and his girl would head back to the woods, holding each other tight. And all around there'd be the sea breeze, the leafy scent of the trees, the sounds of crickets, everything of this world that went on living.

"Was I asleep long?" she asked.

"Nah," said the Rat. "No time at all."

9

It was another rerun of the same old day. One you almost had to dog-ear to keep from getting it mixed up with the rest.

All day long it smelled like autumn. I finished work at the usual time, but when I got home there was no sign of the twins. I tumbled onto the bed still wearing my socks, and lounged about smoking a cigarette. I tried thinking of different things, but nothing came to mind. I sighed, sat up in bed, and stared a while at the white blank of the opposite wall. I didn't have the vaguest idea of what to do – I couldn't keep staring at the wall forever, I told myself. But even that admonition didn't work. A faculty advisor reviewing a graduation thesis would have had the perfect comment: you write well, you argue clearly, but you don't have anything to say.

That pretty well summed it up. The first chance to be alone in a long time, and I had no idea what I was supposed to do with myself.

It's so strange. For years and years I'd lived all by myself, and I'd managed well enough, hadn't I? Why wouldn't it all come back to me? You don't forget twenty-four years just like that. I felt as if I was in the middle of looking for something, but had lost track of what it was I'd been trying to find.

What was it now? A bottle opener? An old letter, a receipt, something to clean my ears with?

On the verge of utter distraction, I reached for my bedside Kant, and what should fall out from between the pages but a note. Written in the twins' script, it read, "Gone to the golf course." That's when I really started to worry. Hadn't I warned them never to go onto the golf course without me?

* * *

A golf course can be a risky place in the early evening for those who aren't aware of the dangers. Who knows when a golf ball might come flying

out of nowhere?

I slipped on my tennis shoes, wrapped a sweatshirt around my shoulders on my way out of the apartment, and climbed over the chainlink fence onto the course. Over a gentle rise, past the twelfth hole, past the rest house, through some woods, I walked and walked. The setting sun spilled across the turf from between the trees along the western fringe. In a dumbbell-shaped sand trap I found an empty coffee-cream cookie box, obviously left there by the twins. I crumpled it up and crammed it into my pocket, taking the trouble to erase our three sets of footprints even though it meant falling further behind. Then I crossed a small wooden footbridge over a brook before finally encountering the twins on a nearby hill. They were sitting sideby-side midway up an outdoor escalator built into the slope on the far side of the hill, thoroughly absorbed in a game of backgammon.

"Didn't I tell you two it was dangerous to come here on your own?"

"The sunset was so beautiful," pleaded one of them.

We walked down the escalator, and stretched ourselves out on a knoll covered with susuki grass for a clear view of the sunset. The view was gorgeous.

"You shouldn't leave trash in the sand traps, you know," I scolded.

"Sorry," the two of them apologized.

"A long time ago, I got hurt in a sandbox. Back when I was in elementary school." I showed them the tip of my left index finger where you could still make out a tiny white thread of a scar a third of an inch long. "Somebody'd buried a broken pop bottle."

The two of them nodded.

"Of course, no one gets cut on an empty cookie box. But still, you mustn't leave things lying around in the sand. Sandy places are sacred and not to be defiled."

"We understand," said one of them.

"We'll be more careful," said the other. "Got any other scars?"

"Well, now that you ask..." And I proceeded to show the two of them every scar on my body. A regular catalog of scars. First, my left eye, where I got hit by the ball in a soccer match. To this day, I still have a small scar on my retina. Then there's my nose, again thanks to soccer. I was going to head the ball, when I met up with another player's teeth on the upswing. And seven stitches in my lower lip. A fall from a bicycle, trying to veer out of the way of a truck. Then there's that chipped tooth...

There we lay, all three of us on the cool turf, listening to the rustling of the susuki tassels in the breeze.

The sun had completely disappeared before we made it back to the apartment for dinner. By the time I'd had myself a bath and a beer, three trout were cooked up and waiting, with some canned asparagus and gigantic sprigs of watercress alongside for color. The taste of trout brought back memories. It tasted like a mountain path on a summer's day. We took our time polishing off those trout. The only things left on our plates were the white trout bones and pencil-thick watercress stalks. The twins immediately set about washing the dishes and brewing coffee.

"About that switch-panel," I said. "Something's really starting to bother me."

They both nodded.

"Why do you suppose it's on its last legs?"

"Probably's sucked up something awful, don't you think?"

"It's gone flat."

I considered the situation a while, a coffee cup in my left hand and a cigarette in my right.

"And what can be done about it?"

The two of them looked at each other and shook their heads. "Too late to do much of anything."

"Back to the soil it goes.

"Ever see a cat with blood poisoning?"

"No," I said.

"It starts getting hard as a rock from the outside in. Takes a long time. And the last thing to go is the heart. It just stops."

I sighed. "But I don't want mine to die on me."

"We know how you feel," said one. "But you know, the load's too heavy for you."

That was putting it mildly. As offhandedly as you'd say, might as well not go skiing this winter because there's not enough snow. At least I could still drink my coffee.

10

Wednesday night the Rat nodded off at nine o'clock, only to wake up again at eleven, unable to get back to sleep. Something squeezed tight around his head, as if he had on a hat two sizes too small. A downright unpleasant feeling. Nothing to do but get up. The Rat walked into the kitchen in his pajamas, and gulped down a glass of ice water. Then he started to think about her. As he stood at the window watching the beacon light, his eyes drew back along the jetty until he was looking in the vicinity of her apartment. He thought of the waves pounding in the darkness, the sand peppering her window. But no matter how much he thought about it, he never made any headway – who was he kidding?

Ever since he'd met the woman, the Rat's life had become an endless repetition, week after week. He couldn't keep track of the date. What month was it?

October, probably. Or was it? Saturdays he'd see her, then for three days from Sunday to Tuesday he'd dwell on the memory. Thursdays, Fridays, half the day Saturday, he'd be making weekend plans. That left only Wednesdays up in the air, with nothing to do. No progress, no setbacks. These Wednesdays...

After a leisurely ten-minute smoke, he changed out of his pajamas, put on a windbreaker over his shirt, and went down to the underground parking garage. After twelve, there was hardly a soul out and about. Only the streetlamps shining on the darkened streets. The shutters on J's Bar were already rolled down, but the Rat pushed them up half-way, ducked under, and headed on downstairs.

J sat alone behind the counter smoking a cigarette, some dozen towels he'd washed draped over the backs of chairs to dry.

"Just one beer, how about it?"

"Fine by me," came J's cheerful reply.

It was the first time the Rat had come to J's Bar after hours. All the lights were out, save the ones over the counter, even the ventilation and air-conditioning were silent. Only the smell that had soaked into the floor and walls over the years lingered.

The Rat stepped behind the counter, took a beer from the refrigerator, and poured himself a glass.

The air hung in layers of murky darkness out beyond the bar, warm and dank.

"I really hadn't planned on coming here tonight," the Rat apologized, "but I woke up craving a beer. Be out of here before you know it."

J folded up the newspaper, put it on the counter, and brushed some cigarette ash from his trousers.

"No need to drink and run. I'll even cook something up for you if you're hungry."

"Nah, that's okay. Don't bother. Just beer's fine."

The beer was awfully good. He drank the glass in one go, then let out a satisfied sigh. Then he poured the remaining half a bottle into the glass, and fixed his gaze on the receding head of foam.

"Care to join me in a drink?" the Rat inquired.

To which J smiled uneasily. "Thanks, but I don't touch the stuff. Not a drop."

"Oh, I didn't know."

"It's just my constitution. Can't handle it."

The Rat nodded a couple of times, then sipped his beer in silence. Once again it startled him how little he knew about the Chinese bartender. J was a terribly quiet man. He never volunteered a single thing about himself, and if anyone ever asked, he'd cautiously pull out a ready answer, smooth and innocuous, as if out of a drawer.

Everybody knew that J was a first-generation Chinese, which was not particularly rare as foreigners went in this town. In the Rat's high school soccer club, one forward and one back had been Chinese. No one made much of it.

"Kinda lonesome without music, huh?" said J, throwing the Rat the keys to the jukebox.

The Rat chose five numbers, returned to the counter, and continued with his beer. An old Wayne Newton song flowed from the speakers.

"Don'tcha have to be getting back home?" the Rat asked.

"I don't mind. It's not like somebody's waiting, ya know."

"Live alone?"

"Uh-huh."

The Rat pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, straightened it out, and lit up.

"There's only a cat," J said out of nowhere "An old cat, but a good friend to talk to."

"You talk things over, do you?"

J nodded a few times. "Uh-huh. Been together a long time so we can read each other's moods. I understand what makes the cat tick, the cat knows what makes me tick."

The Rat let out a soft grunt from behind his cigarette. The jukebox whirred, and "MacArthur Park" clicked into position.

"So tell me then, what does a cat think about?"

"All sorts of things. Just like you and me."

"Gee, that's tough," the Rat laughed.

J laughed too, then reflected a moment and ran his finger along the counter. "Crippled in one leg."

"Crippled?" the Rat asked.

"The cat, it's lame. Four winters ago, I think. It came home all covered with blood. The poor thing's paw was all pulpy like marmalade.

The Rat set his glass down on the counter and looked J in the face. "What on earth happened to it?"

"Don't know. I guess it got hit by a car. But y'know, it was somehow worse than that. Getting run over by a tire wouldn't do that. I mean, it looked as if it'd been mangled in a vise. Flat as a pancake. I'd almost bet it was someone's idea of a practical joke."

"Come on," the Rat said shaking his head in disbelief. "Who'd want to do that to a cat's paw?"

J tamped one of his filterless cigarettes over and over again on the counter, then put it to his lips and lit up.

"You said it. Not a reason in the world to crush a cat's paw. It's a real well-behaved cat, never done anything wrong. Nothing anyone would have to gain by crushing its paw. It's just senseless and cruel. But y'know, the world's full of that kind of groundless ill will. I'll never understand it, you'll never understand it. But it exists all the same. You might even say it's got us hemmed in.

The Rat nodded once more, his eyes fixed on his beer glass. "I just can't understand why."

"That's all right. If you can let it go at not understanding, that's the best anyone could expect."

So saying, J blew cigarette smoke out into the dark emptiness beyond the bar. He followed the white smoke with his eyes until it completely vanished in the air.

A long silence passed between the two of them. The Rat gazing at his glass, lost in thought, J running his finger back and forth along the counter top as usual. The jukebox began to play the last record. A soul ballad in falsetto.

"Say J," said the Rat, eyes still on the glass, "I've lived here for twenty-five years, and it seems to me I haven't really learned a thing."

J said nothing, but just stared at his fingers. Then he gave a little shrug. "Me, I've seen forty-five years, and I've only figured out one thing. That's this: if a person would just make the effort, there's something to be learned from everything. From even the most ordinary, commonplace things, there's always something you can learn. I read somewhere that they say there's even different philosophies in razors. Fact is, if it weren't for that, nobody'd survive."

The Rat nodded, then finished off the last inch of beer in his glass. The record ended, the jukebox clicked off, and the premises fell quiet again.

"I think I see what you're getting at, but" the Rat began, then swallowed the thought. But – the word was on his lips, there wasn't anything more he could say. So he smiled and stood up, thanked J and said, "Can I give you a lift home?"

"Nah, it's okay. My place is close by, and besides I like to walk."

"Well, now, you get some shut-eye. Regards to your cat."

"Thanks."

Climbing the stairs, he stepped out into the crisp autumn air. The Rat made his way to the parking lot, tapping the trees along the roadside lightly with his fist as he walked. He came to a halt in front of the parking meter, stared at it for no reason at all, then got in the car. After a few wrong turns, he found himself cruising toward the ocean. He stopped the car along the shore road in view of her apartment building. Half the apartments were still lit. In a few, shadows moved behind the curtains.

The woman's apartment was dark. Even her bedside lamp was out. Probably asleep. It was a terribly lonely feeling.

The sound of the waves seemed to be growing louder. Almost as if any minute now they would break over the seawall and wash the Rat – car and all – somewhere faraway. He switched on the car radio and let back the reclining seat, eyes closed, hands behind his head, half-listening to some deejay's drivel. He was dead tired, thanks to which, whatever emotions he might have had, simply came and went without gaining a foothold. The Rat began to relax and lay down his empty head on the mingled sounds of the waves and the deejay until sleep crept over him.

11

Thursday morning, the twins woke me up. Little did I notice that it was fifteen minutes earlier than usual as I shaved, drank my coffee, and read through the morning paper, still sticky with fresh ink.

"There's a favor we have to ask," said one of the twins.

"Do you think you could borrow a car this Sunday?" said the other.

"Perhaps," I said, "but where do you want to go?"

"The reservoir."

"The reservoir?"

They both nodded.

"What do you want to do at the reservoir?"

"Last rites."

"Whose?"

"The switch-panel's."

"I see," said I, and returned to the paper.

Unfortunately, on Sunday it began drizzling from the morning. To be sure, I had no way of knowing what kind of weather was most appropriate for a switch-panel's funeral. The twins didn't broach the subject of the rain, so I kept quiet.

Saturday night I borrowed my business partner's light blue Volkswagen. He insinuated that maybe I'd found myself a woman, to which I merely said

Umm.

The back seat of the bug was stained across one side, probably milk chocolate rubbed in by his kid, though it looked like bloodstains from a machine gun battle. My partner didn't have any decent cassettes for the car stereo, so we traveled the full hour and a half to the reservoir without any music, driving on and on without a word. As we drove, the rain came down harder and then weaker, then harder again, then weaker, alternating at regular intervals. It was enough to make you yawn, that rain.

The only sound was that of the high-speed whoosh of passing cars on the highway.

One of the twins sat in the front seat, the other sat in the back holding a shopping bag with a thermos bottle and the defunct switch-panel. The girls

were properly somber in keeping with the funeral day. And I followed suit. We were even somber as we ate roast corn-on-the-cob at a roadside rest stop.

Only the sound of the kernels popping off the roasting cobs broke the restrained mood. We left behind three corncobs nibbled clean to the last kernel, then we were back in the car and off again.

There were an awful lot of dogs around, wandering aimlessly in the rain like schools of yellowtail in an aquarium. So we had to keep honking the horn nonstop. For all you could tell from their faces, they weren't the least bit concerned about the rain or the cars. Generally, their expressions would turn downright disdainful at the sound of the horn, but they dodged out of the way just the same. Of course, there was no way for them to dodge the rain. The dogs were sopping wet, right down to their buttocks; some looked like waifs from a Balzac novel, others like pensive Buddhist priests.

The twin in the seat next to me put a cigarette to my lips, and lit it for me. Then she put her little hand on the crotch of my cotton pants, and stroked. Her action was more like some kind of reassurance than stimulation.

The rain seemed destined to fall forever. October rains are like that. Falling steadily, ceaselessly, until everything is soaked through and through. The ground was soggy. The trees, the expressway, the fields, the cars, the houses, the dogs – everything without exception had soaked up rain, filling the world with a hopeless chill.

The road led up into the hills, and eventually we emerged from the depths of the forest onto the bank of the reservoir. Thanks to the rain there was not a soul in sight. As far as the eye could see, rain poured down across the surface of the reservoir.

The sight of that rain-swept reservoir was far more heart-wrenching than I could have imagined. We parked beside the bank, and sat in the car drinking coffee from the thermos and eating the cookies the twins had brought along. There were three kinds of cookies: coffee cream, butter cream, and maple syrup, which we divided up to make sure that we each got our fair share.

The whole time, the rain poured down relentlessly and silently over the reservoir. The sound was something like shredded newspaper falling on a thick pile carpet. It was like the rain that falls in Claude Lelouche movies.

Once we finished the cookies and had each had our two cups of coffee, we all brushed off our laps in unison as if by prior arrangement. No one spoke.

"Well, we might as well get it over with," voiced one twin.

The other nodded.

I put out my cigarette.

We walked to the end of the catwalk that projected out over the water without bothering to put up umbrellas. The reservoir had been formed by damming up the river. The surface of the water curved unnaturally where it lapped into the folds of the hillsides. The color of the water gave you an unsettling feeling of depth. The raindrops made tiny ripples everywhere.

One of the twins took our dearly beloved switch-panel out of the paper bag and handed it over to me. In the rain, the switch-panel looked more miserable than ever.

"Say some kind of prayer, will you?"

"Prayer?" I was caught off guard.

"It's a funeral, so we need to say last rites."

"It hadn't occurred to me," I said. "I haven't got anything prepared."

"Doesn't matter, anything's fine."

"Just for form's sake."

I searched for some appropriate words, meanwhile getting soaked from head to toe.

The twins glanced alternately from me to the switch-panel with a worried look on their faces.

"The obligation of philosophy," I drew on my Kant, "is to eradicate illusions born of misunderstanding. Oh, switch-panel! Rest ye at the bottom of the reservoir."

"Toss it."

"Huh?"

"The switch-panel."

I went into a windup, and hurled it up at a forty-five degree angle with all my might. The switch panel traced a beautiful arc through the rain, and struck the water. The ripples slowly spread, finally reaching our feet.

"That was a wonderful prayer."

"You make it up?"

"But of course," I said.

Then the three of us, drenched as dogs, huddled together and stared across the reservoir.

"How deep is it?" asked one.

"Very deep," I answered.

"Are there fish?" asked the other.

"Ponds this size always have fish."

Seen from a distance, the three of us standing there must have looked like some classy memorial marker.

12

Thursday morning that same week, I put on my first sweater of autumn. A totally undistinguished gray sweater, slightly frayed under the arms, but still quite comfortable. I shaved myself a sight more neatly than usual, put on heavy cotton slacks, and pulled out my scuffed-up desert boots. They somehow looked like two trained puppies at my feet. The twins buzzed around the room gathering together my cigarettes and lighter and wallet and train pass.

I sat down at my desk in the office, and sharpened six pencils while I sipped the coffee the office girl brought me. The whole room was filled with a sweater-just-out-of-storage and pencil-lead smell.

Lunchtime, I ate out and once again played with the Abyssinians. I stuck the tip of my little finger through a gap in the showcase, and two cats vied with each other to jump up and bite me.

That day someone from the pet shop let me hold one of the cats. Its coat felt like fine cashmere, and it pressed a cold nose to my lips.

"It really cuddles up to people," the shop attendant said.

I expressed my thanks and returned the cat to the case, then bought a box of cat food I couldn't use. The attendant wrapped it up nicely, and as I walked out of the pet shop with it under my arm, the two cats stared after me as if trying to recall some fragment of a dream.

When I got back to the office, the girl brushed the cat hairs off my sweater.

"I was playing with a cat," I offered by way of explanation.

"Your sweater's all frayed under the arms."

"I know. It's been like that since last year. It got caught on the rearview mirror while I was trying to knock over an armored car."

"Off with it," she said, unamused.

I took off the sweater, and she sat beside the chair, her long legs crossed, and proceeded to darn it with black yarn. While she was mending the sweater, I returned to my desk, sharpened my pencils for the afternoon, and got back to work. Even if anyone saw fit to comment, you could hardly fault my work habits. I did exactly the work I was asked in exactly the

prescribed amount of time, and did it all as conscientiously as possible – that was my method. I surely would have been prized at Auschwitz. The problem was, I think, that the places I fit in were always falling behind the times.

But that probably couldn't be helped. There was no going back to Auschwitz or twinseater Kamikaze torpedo-planes. Nobody wears miniskirts any more, nobody listens to Jan and Dean. And when was the last time you saw a girl wearing a garter belt?

When the clock struck three, the office girl came to my desk as usual with hot green tea and three cookies. She'd mended my sweater beautifully.

"Say, could I have a little talk with you?"

"Go ahead," I said, munching on a cookie

"About the trip in November," she said, "how does Hokkaido sound?" We were planning to take a company trip, just the three of us.

"Not bad," I said.

"Then it's settled. Do you think there'll be any bears?"

"Hmm, I imagine they'll all be hibernating."

She nodded, relieved "By the way, could you have dinner with me tonight? There's a great lobster restaurant nearby."

"Fine by me," I said.

The restaurant was a five-minute taxi ride from the office in a quiet residential area. We sat down, and a black-suited waiter floated noiselessly across the woven palm-fiber carpeting to leave us with two menus the size of swimming pool paddle boards.

We ordered two beers before dinner.

"The lobster here is really good. They boil it live."

I acknowledged this with a grunt and drank my beer. Her slender fingers toyed with the star-shaped pendant around her neck.

"If you've got something to say, you might as well come out with it before dinner," I said. The moment I'd spoken, I regretted it. Happens every time.

She smiled slightly. Then, simply because it was a bother to put that one-tenth-of-an-inch smile back in its proper place, she kept it there on her mouth a while. The restaurant was so empty you could almost hear the lobsters waving their feelers.

"Do you like your present job?" she asked.

"Hmm. You know, I don't believe I've ever thought about work in that way. But I can't say as I'm dissatisfied.

"Nor me, I can't say I'm unhappy," she said, taking a sip of beer. "The pay's good, you two are both considerate, and I have a free hand at arranging my vacations."

I didn't say anything. It'd been a long time since I'd given a serious listen to someone else's troubles.

"But I'm only twenty," she continued, "and I don't want to end up like this."

Our conversation was temporarily brought to a halt while they arranged our dishes on the table.

"You're young," I said, "with everything still ahead of you, love, marriage. Your life's going to go through 311 kinds of changes."

"Nothing's going to change," she muttered, deftly wielding her knife and fork to crack the lobster shell. "Nobody's going to take a fancy to the likes of me. I'll spend my whole life assembling lousy roach traps and darning sweaters."

I sighed. I felt as if I'd suddenly aged years.

"You're cute, you're attractive, you've got nice legs and a good head on your shoulders. You crack a mean lobster. Everything's gonna work out just fine."

A glum silence fell over her, and she continued eating her lobster. I ate my lobster, too. And all the while I thought about the switch-panel at the bottom of the reservoir.

"What were you doing when you were twenty?"

"I was crazy about a girl." Back in 1969, our year.

"So what happened to her?"

"Things came between us."

"Were you happy?"

"If you look at things from a distance," I said as I swallowed some lobster, "most anything looks beautiful."

By the time we'd finished our food, the place had begun to fill with customers, the clatter of knives and forks, and the screech of dragging chairs. I ordered a coffee, and she ordered a coffee and a lemon soufflé.

"How about now? You have a girlfriend?"

After thinking it over, I decided to exclude the twins. "No," I said.

"And you're not lonely?"

"I'm used to it. I've had practice."

"Practice?"

I lit a cigarette and blew the smoke not half a yard above her head. "I was born under a strange sign. You see, whatever I've wanted I've always been able to get. But whenever I get that something, I manage to spoil something else. You know what I mean?"

"Kind of."

"Nobody believes me, but it's true. I only realized it myself three years ago. That's when I thought, better just not want anything any more."

She nodded. "And so that's how you plan to spend the rest of your life?"

"Probably. At least I won't be bothering anybody."

"If you really feel that way," she said, "why not live in a shoe box?"

A charming idea.

We walked side by side to the station. The sweater kept me comfortable in the night air.

"Okay, I'll keep plugging away," she said.

"Wasn't much help, was I?"

"No, actually, it took a load off me just to be able to talk."

We caught trains going in opposite directions from the same platform.

"You're really not lonely?" she asked one last time. And while I was searching for a good reply, her train came.

13

On any given day, something claims our attention. Anything at all, inconsequential things. A rosebud, a misplaced hat, that sweater we liked as a child, an old Gene Pitney record. A parade of trivia with no place to go. Things that bump around in our consciousness for two or three days, then go back to wherever they came from to darkness. We're always digging wells in our heads. While above the wells, birds flit back and forth.

That autumn Sunday evening it was pinball that claimed my attention. The twins and I were on the golf course watching the sunset from the green of the eighth hole. It was a long par 5 hole with no obstacles and no slope. Only a straight fairway like the corridor of an elementary school. On the seventh hole, a student from the neighborhood was practicing the flute. The sun was setting behind the hills to a heart-rending backup score of two-octave scales. Why, at that very moment, I had to get stuck on pinball machines, I'll never know.

Not only that, but as one moment followed the next, the pinball images expanded at a frantic pace in my mind. I shut my eyes, and my ears rang with the sounds of bumpers rebounding balls, and the score tallies clicking away.

* * *

In 1970, when the Rat and I still had our bouts of beer drinking at J's Bar, we were by no means the most earnest pinball players around. The machine in the bar was a rare three-flipper "Spaceship" model. The field was divided into upper and lower sections, the upper with one flipper and the lower with two. A model from the nice, peaceful times before solid-state circuitry inflated the world of pinball. There was a photo of the Rat and the machine, taken at the peak of his infatuation with pinball to commemorate his best score: 92,500. There was the Rat grinning away, leaning up against the pinball machine, also grinning away with the

numbers 92,500 still in place. The only heartwarming photo I ever took with my Kodak Instamatic. The Rat looked like a World War II ace. And the pinball machine looked like a veteran fighter plane. The kind of fighter plane whose propeller the mechanic had to spin by hand, and whose canopy the pilot would slam shut once it was off and running. The number 92,500 forged a bond between the Rat and the machine, perhaps even a feeling of kinship.

Once a week, the money-collector-cum-repair-man from the pinball company would pay a call on J's Bar. He was an abnormally thin man of about thirty who almost never spoke to anyone. He'd come in, and without even so much as a glance over at J, he'd unlock the lid to the compartment under the pinball machine, and let the coins come gushing out into a canvas drawstring pouch. Then for a spot test, he'd take one of those coins, put it back into the machine, check out the plunger action two or three times, and finally let the ball fly with no trace of enjoyment. Next he'd aim balls at the bumpers to observe the condition of the magnets, send balls down all the rails, and into all the targets. Drop targets, kick-out holes, the lotto target. Then, last but not least, he'd hit the bonus light, and with a look of utter relief, drop the ball into the out lane to end the game. That done, he'd turn to J, give him this casual-no problems, eh kind of nod, and leave. All in less time than it takes to smoke half a cigarette.

I'd forget to tap the ash off my cigarette, the Rat'd forget to drink his beer. Just watching that commanding display of technique always took our breath away.

"I must be dreaming," said the Rat. "With technique like that, you could score a hundred fifty thousand, easy. Nah, more like two hundred thousand."

"He's a pro, what d'ya expect," I consoled the Rat. Even so, there was no salvaging the ace pilot's pride.

"Compared to that, my game's about as strong as a little girl's pinkie," the Rat pouted, falling into a silent huff that lead to visions of scores soaring to six digits.

"That's only a job to him," I continued my spiel. "It might have been fun at first, but just try doing that every day from morning to night. Who wouldn't be bored out their minds?"

"Not me," the Rat said, shaking his head. "You'd never see me bored."

14

It had been a long time since J's Bar was this crowded. Most were new faces, but J had no gripes– a customer's a customer. He had every reason to be in good spirits. For what with the icepick cracking ice, the clinking of ice and tumblers, laughter, the Jackson Five on the jukebox, clouds of white smoke hovering about the ceiling like balloons of dialogue in a comic book, that night seemed like another round of summer.

Nonetheless, there was something "off" about the Rat. He sat by himself at one end of the counter, skimming the same page of his book over and over again before finally giving up and closing it. If at all possible, he would have liked nothing better than to chug down the last of his beer, go home, and simply sleep. If he would have been able to sleep, that is.

For one week now, luck had lost all sight of the Rat. Scant snatches of sleep and beer and cigarettes, and even the weather was starting to give out on him. The rainwater washed down off the hills into the river, then flowed to the sea, turning it a blotchy brown and gray. A disgusting view, an ugly outlook. He felt as if his head was stuffed full of wads of old newspaper. He slept lightly, and never for very long. It was like sleeping in a dentist's overheated waiting room. Whenever anybody opened the door, you'd wake up. He gazed at the clock.

Half the week he'd been immersing himself in whiskey, he'd decided to freeze all thought for a while. One by one he'd inspected the cracks of his consciousness like a polar bear looking for ice thick enough to cross. And only when he found prospects that might just possibly get him through the rest of the week did he sleep. The trouble was, when he awoke, everything would be just like before. Except maybe his head would ache a little.

The Rat looked blankly at the six empty bottles of beer lined up in front of him. Between the bottles he had a good view of J's back.

Maybe the tide's going out, thought the Rat. I was eighteen the first time I had a beer here. How many thousands of bottles of beer ago had it been? How many thousands of potatoes worth of fries, how many thousands of jukebox selections? All of it, everything that had swept like waves up to this little barge, was withdrawing. Haven't I already drunk enough beers in

my time? Of course, by the time people get to be thirty or forty they've had their share of beers. Even so, he thought, there's something about the beer here. And twenty-five, that's not such a bad age to retire. People with any sense have gotten out of college and are working as loan clerks at the bank by this age.

The Rat added another empty bottle to the lineup, and drank down half his brimming glass in one gulp. Out of sheer reflex, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then wiped his damp hand on the seat of his cotton pants.

Let's think this one through, he told himself.

Don't run away, think. You're twenty-five years old, a good age to be thinking a bit. You're two twelve-year old-boys old, kid, how do you measure up? Not even one boy's worth. Maybe not even worth as much as an ant farm in a pickle jar. Oh, lay off; enough with these stupid metaphors. They don't do any good. Think, where did you go wrong? C'mon, remember. Like I even know where to start looking.

The Rat gave up and guzzled down the rest of his beer. Then he raised his hand and ordered another bottle.

"You're drinking too much today," J said. No matter, the eighth bottle took its place on the counter.

His head ached a bit. His body bobbed up and down on unseen waves. He felt sluggish behind the eyes. Vomit, said a voice at the back of his head.

Go ahead and spit it up. Then you can have yourself a good long think. So stand up, get yourself to the john. No good. Can't make it to first base.

Yet somehow the Rat managed to throw out his chest, stride to the restroom, open the door, chase out a young woman who was touching up her mascara, and bend over the toilet.

How many years has it been since I got myself vomiting sick? Forgotten how to vomit. You undo your trousers, was it? Cut the dumb jokes. Just shut up and vomit. Vomit till nothing comes but gastric juice.

Once the Rat had vomited up all the liquid in his stomach, he sat down on the toilet and smoked a cigarette. Then he washed his face and hands with soap, and smoothed down his hair at the mirror with wet hands. A bit on the gloomy side perhaps, but his nose and cheeks weren't so bad-looking.

The kind of face a junior high school teacher could love, maybe.

After leaving the restroom, he went over to the woman whom he'd interrupted at her make-up, and apologized. He returned to the counter, drank half a glass of beer, chased it with a single gulp of icewater from J. He shook his head two or three times, and by the time he'd lit up a cigarette, his head was resuming its normal functions.

Well, ready then, the Rat muttered. There's a long night ahead, let's get down to thinking.

15

It was the winter of 1970 when I slipped into the enchanted kingdom of pinball. I might as well have been living in a dark hole, those six months. A hole dug to my size right in the middle of an open meadow, where I just covered myself, putting a lid on all sound. Not a thing engaged me. When evening rolled around I'd wake up, bundle up in my coat, and have myself a time off in a corner of the game center.

I'd finally found myself a three-flipper "Spaceship" exactly like the one at J's Bar. When I put in a coin and pressed the play button, the machine would raise its targets to such a succession of noises it'd almost start shaking. Then the bonus light would go out, the six digits of the scoreboard would return to zero, and the first ball would spring into the lane. An endless stream of coins fed into the machine, until one month later, a chill and rainy evening in early winter, my score soared to six figures like a hot-air balloon after the last sandbag is tossed overboard.

I wrestled my trembling fingers away from the flipper buttons, leaned back against the wall, drank my ice-cold can of beer, and stared for the longest time at those six digits registered on the scoreboard–105,220.

That was the beginning of my brief honeymoon with the pinball machine. I hardly showed up at the university, and poured half the earnings from my part-time job into pinball. I became practiced in most techniques – hugging, passing, trapping, the stop shot – and soon enough it seemed someone would always be watching in the background when I played. A high school girl with bright red lipstick even came up and brushed her breast against my arm.

By the time I broke 150,000, winter had really set in. There I'd be, alone in the freezing, deserted game center, bundled up in my duffel coat, muffler wrapped around my neck up to my ears, grappling with the machine. The face I'd encounter from time to time in the restroom mirror looked lean and haggard. My skin was flaky. The last sip of each beer began to taste like

lead. Cigarette butts scattered everywhere around my feet, I'd munch on a hot dog or something I'd keep thrust in my pocket.

She was great, though. That three-flipper "Spaceship" – only I understood her, and only she understood me. Whenever I pressed her replay button, she'd perk up with a little hum, click the six digits on the board to zero, then smile at me. I'd pull her plunger into position – not a fraction of an inch off – and let that gleaming silver ball fly up the lane onto the field. And while the ball was racing about, it was as if I were smoking potent hashish; my mind was set free.

All sorts of disconnected ideas floated into my head, then disappeared. All sorts of people drifted into view across the glass top over the field, then faded away. Like a two-way mirror to my dreams, the glass top reflected my own mind as it flickered in unison with the bumper and bonus lights.

It's not your fault, she said. To which I only kept shaking my head. You're not to blame, you gave it your all, didn't you?

No way, said I. Left flipper, top transfer, ninth target. Not even close. I didn't get a single thing right. I hardly moved a finger. But I could have, if I'd been on the ball.

There's only so much a person can do, she said.

Maybe so, said I, but that doesn't change a thing.

It'll always be that way. Return lane, trap, kick out, out hole, rebound, hugging, sixth target bonus light, 121,150.

It's over, she said, it's all over.

* * *

In February of the new year, she vanished. The game center was stripped clean, and the following month it had become an all-night doughnut shop.

The kind of place where girls in curtain-material uniforms brought you tasteless doughnuts on tasteless plates. There were high school students who parked their bikes out front and nighthawk cabbies, bar hostesses, and diehard hippies, all drinking coffee with the exact same bottomed-out expression. I ordered a cup of their awful coffee and a cinnamon doughnut, and asked the waitress if she knew anything about the game center.

She gave me a dirty look, the way she might have looked at a doughnut that had fallen on the floor.

"Game center?"

"The joint that was here up to just a little while ago."

"Haven't the foggiest," she said, shaking her head wearily. Nobody remembers a thing from the month before, that's the kind of town it was.

I roamed the streets in a blue funk. My three-flipper Spaceship was gone, and nobody knew where.

That's when I gave up pinball. When the time comes, everybody gives up pinball. Nothing more to it.

16

Rain had been falling for days, then suddenly let up on Friday evening. From the penthouse window, the town made a depressing sight, soaked to the gills and swollen with rainwater. The setting sun breaking through the clouds turned them a mysterious color, and the afterglow painted the room in the same hue.

The Rat slipped a windbreaker over his T-shirt and headed into town. The asphalt streets of the shopping arcade were dotted here and there with still puddles that stretched out dark and wet as far as the eye could see. The whole town had that evening-after-the-rain smell about it. Pines along the river stood drenched top to bottom, fine droplets at the drooping tips of their green needles. Runoff coursed thick and brown into the river, then slid down the channeled concrete river bottom out to sea.

Evening was over almost as soon as it began, and darkness fell damp over everything. Then in an instant, the dampness turned to fog.

The Rat rested his elbow on the car window and made a slow tour of the town. Banks of white fog slanted westward up the drive into the hills. In the end, he took the riverside road down to the coast.

He stopped the car by the seawall, let back his reclining seat, and smoked a cigarette. The sand on the beach, the concrete blocks along the shoreline, the trees of the windbreak, everything was wetted down and dark. Yet a warm yellow light poured through the blinds of the woman's apartment. He glanced at his wristwatch. Seven fifteen.

A time for people to be finishing dinner, all warm and snug in their apartments.

The Rat put both hands behind his head, shut his eyes, and tried to picture her apartment. He wasn't really sure because he'd only gone in twice.

The door opened on a six-mat dining-kitchen; orange tablecloth, potted ornamentals, four chairs, orange juice and newspaper on the table, a stainless steel teapot, all neatly arranged, not a smudge or stain anywhere, and the two small rooms beyond with the partition removed to make one

room. A long, narrow glass-topped desk, and on it three ceramic beer mugs crammed full of all sorts of pencils and rulers and drafting pens. And a tray laden with erasers, inkeradicator, old receipts, drafting tape, clips of assorted colors and yes, a pencil sharpener. Stamps.

Alongside the desk was a well-used drafting table with a long crane-necked lamp. The color of the shade, green. And over against the back wall, a bed. A small Scandinavian-style plain wooden bed.

It could hold two people, but the thing would creak like a rowboat at the park.

The fog grew thicker as the night wore on. Its milk-white obscurity hugged the coast, moving slowly. Every once in a while a pair of yellow fog lamps would approach head on, then pass by the Rat at a reduced speed. A fine mist crept in through the window, and dampened every last thing in the car. The seats, the windshield, his windbreaker, the cigarettes in his pocket, everything. The freighters offshore began to sound their foghorns like the plaintive lowing of stranded calves. Each foghorn droned at its own pitch, high or low, piercing the gloom and drifting up toward the hills.

And on the righthand wall? the Rat continued, trying to recall her rooms. A bookcase and a tiny stereo, and records. And a wardrobe. Two Ben Shahn reproductions. Nothing special on the shelves. Mostly architectural trade books. Some travel books, too, guidebooks, travelogues, maps, a number of best sellers, something on Mozart, sheet music, several dictionaries, some kind of dedication penned inside the cover of a French dictionary. The records were mostly Bach or Haydn or Mozart. Those and a few keepsake records from her younger days: Pat Boone, Bobby Darren, The Platters.

Beyond that, the Rat was stumped. Something was missing. Something important. Something that robbed the whole apartment of its reality, left it floating in space. But what?

Okay, hold on; got to remember. The lights in the apartment and the carpet. What kind of lights? And what color carpet? He just couldn't remember.

On impulse the Rat opened the door and was about to dash through the trees of the windbreak, to go knock on her door so he could check out the lights and carpeting. Of all the idiotic notions. The Rat leaned back in his seat, this time to look out to sea. Other than the white fog over the dark

water, there was nothing to see. Except off and on, out there, the orange beacon light blinked, steady as a heartbeat.

For a while, her apartment simply floated in the obscurity with neither ceilings or walls. Then little by little, the image grew weaker in its details, until it had completely vanished.

The Rat turned his head toward the ceiling, and slowly closed his eyes. Then at the flick of an imaginary switch, he turned off all the lights in his head, and darkness came over him again.

17

The three-flipper "Spaceship," somewhere she kept calling me. For days and days, she called.

With devastating speed, I finished the mountain of work that had piled up. No more lunch breaks for me, no more playing with the Abyssinians. I spoke to no one. The office girl would come in to check on me from time to time, only to walk out again shaking her head in exasperation. I'd finish a day's work by two in the afternoon, throw the manuscripts on the girl's desk, and fly out of the office. Then I'd go around to game centers throughout Tokyo, just looking for my three-flipper "Spaceship." But it was no use. Not a soul had seen or heard of it.

"A four-flipper 'Underground Explorers' won't do? Brand-new machine, just in," one game center owner said.

"Afraid not, sorry."

He seemed a little disappointed.

"How about a three-flipper 'Southpaw,' then? Gives you the bonus light on cycle hits."

"I'm really very sorry, but I'm only interested in the 'Spaceship'."

So he did what he could. He gave me the name and phone number of a pinball fanatic acquaintance of his.

"This guy might know something about the machine you're looking for. He's a regular encyclopedia, probably the most up on any machine in the catalogue. Kinda strange character, though."

"Thanks," I said.

"Nah, don't mention it. Hope you find it."

I went into a quiet little coffee shop, dialed the number. Five rings and a man answered the phone.

In the background I could hear the NHK seven o'clock news and a baby crying.

"I'd like to ask you about a special pinball machine, if I may," I declared after giving my name.

For a while, there was total silence on the other end of the line.

"What kind of machine might that be," said the man, turning down the sound of the television.

"A three-flipper 'Spaceship'."

The man gave it a thoughtful hmm.

"With planets and a rocketship painted on the board – "

"I know it," he interrupted, then coughed. He spoke like a teacher straight out of graduate school.

"Nineteen sixty-eight model by Gilbert & Sands, Chicago, Illinois. Of some fame as an illfated machine."

"Ill-fated machine?"

"Well, how about it?" he said. "Worth your while to get together and talk?"

We decided to meet the following evening.

* * *

After exchanging name cards, we gave the waitress our order. Two coffees. I was taken aback to find out he was a university lecturer. Somewhere in his thirties, his hair was beginning to thin, but his body looked strong and tanned.

"I teach Spanish at the university," he said "It's like sprinkling water over the desert."

I nodded eagerly.

"Get any Spanish work at your translation service?"

"I handle English, another guy does French. And that's almost more than we can manage."

"Unfortunate," he said, with his arms crossed.

Although it didn't seem so unfortunate to him at all. He fiddled around with the knot in his tie a while.

"Ever been to Spain?" he asked.

"No, unfortunately not," I said.

The coffee came and that ended our discussion of Spain. We drank our coffee in silence.

"The Gilbert & Sands Company is what you might call a latecomer to pinball," he began suddenly. "From World War II through the Korean War they were mostly involved with making bomb bay mechanisms. When the Korean operations ended, they took it as sign to diversify into other fields. Pinball machines, bingo machines, slot machines, jukeboxes, popcorn vendors – your so-called peace-time industries. They came out with their first pinball machine in 1952. Wasn't bad. Real sturdy, cheap pricetag. But not a particularly interesting machine. Or rather, as the article in Billboard put it, 'A pinball machine like a Soviet government issue woman's army brassiere.' Nonetheless it did quite well as a business venture. They exported it to Mexico, then to all of Latin America. Countries where there aren't many special technicians so they're happier with sturdy machines that don't often break down than with ones with complicated mechanisms."

He paused long enough to drink some water. It was a real pity he didn't have a slide projection screen and a long pointer.

"However, as you know, the pinball industry in America – that is to say, the whole world over — is all sewed up by four companies Gottlieb, Bally, Chicago Coin, and Williams – the so-called Big Four. Gilbert tried to punch its way in. Put up a good fight for five years. Then in 1957, Gilbert pulled out of pinball."

"Pulled out?"

He nodded and dourly drank the dregs of his coffee, then wiped his mouth with a handkerchief a couple of times. "Yeah, they gave up. The company itself was turning a profit, what with the Latin American exports and all. But they just decided to get out while the going was good, before their wounds got too deep. It turns out pinball manufacturing is a complicated business, and requires a lot of know-how. You need a team of crack technicians, and you need a supervisor to coordinate them. Next you need a nationwide network. And agents to continually stock your parts, along with enough repairmen to get to any broken machine within five hours. Well, unfortunately, our newcomer, Gilbert, didn't have what it took. So they simply swallowed their tears and withdrew, and for seven years they stuck to making vending machines, and windshield wipers for Chrysler. But that didn't mean they'd given up on pinball."

At that he pursed his lips. He took a cigarette out of his jacket pocket, tamped the end on the table-top, and lit up.

"No, they hadn't given up. They had their pride, you know. R&D was underway at an underground workshop. They secretly rounded up experts who'd left the Big Four, and formed their own project team. What's more, they gave them a huge research budget for their mission to make a machine that'd be more than a match for anything the Big Four had. And within five years, no less.

"That was in 1959. Those five years the company put to good use. Using their other products, they set up the perfect network that covered everywhere from Vancouver to Waikiki. Now all the preparations were complete.

"They came out with their first new model on schedule in 1964. It was called the 'Big Wave'."

He pulled a black scrapbook out of his leather briefcase, opened the pages, and handed it over to me. There, he'd pasted what seemed to be a magazine clipping, complete with a frontview photo of the "Big Wave," a field chart and board design, even an instruction card.

"This was a truly unique machine. Full of all sorts of gimmicks which had never been seen before. Like the selectable sequence patterns, for one. With the 'Big Wave,' you could choose the pattern best suited to your own technique. This machine caused quite a commotion.

"Of course, these ideas the Gilbert Company came up with have now become commonplace, but at the time they were state-of-the-art innovations. Moreover, the machine was extremely well built. In the first place, it was built to last. Where Big Four jobs might give out after three years, this could last a good five years. In the second place, it was geared to technique, rather than luck. After that, Gilbert brought out a number of famous machines along the same lines–the 'Oriental Express,' 'Sky Pilot,' 'Trans-America' – all highly acclaimed among true enthusiasts. The 'Spaceship' was their last model.

"The 'Spaceship' was a major switch from the previous four machines. Where those four had been packed solid with innovation upon innovation, the 'Spaceship' was frightfully orthodox and simple. There was not a single device the Big Four hadn't already used. On the contrary, you might even say the machine was really meant as a challenge to the Big Four on their own terms. They'd gained self-confidence by then."

He spoke slowly, enunciating every word. I kept nodding as I drank my coffee. I drank water when the coffee was gone, then smoked a cigarette

when there was no more water.

"The 'Spaceship' – now there was a curious machine. Nothing that would really grab you at first sight. But give it a play and there's something different about it. Same flippers, same targets as all the others, but something's different. That something possessed people like a drug. I don't know why. But I do have two reasons for calling the 'Spaceship' an ill-fated machine. The first being that people never fully understood its greatness, and by the time they did begin to understand, it was too late. The second was that the company went bankrupt. They overdid it on the conscientiousness. Gilbert was absorbed by one of your conglomerates. Whereupon the head office said there was no need for a pinball division. And that was that. A total of fifteen hundred 'Spaceships' were produced, which explains why today they are regarded with such awe, and why in America fanatics will offer two thousand dollars for a 'Spaceship.' Not that there are any up for sale."

"Why is that?"

"Because nobody wants to let go of one. Nobody's capable of letting one go. A curious machine, that."

He looked at his watch out of habit when he finished, then smoked his cigarette. I ordered a second cup of coffee.

"How many machines were imported into Japan?"

"I looked into it. Exactly three."

"That's all?"

He nodded. "That's because there wasn't any route to Japan for Gilbert products. In sixty-nine, one import agency brought some in as an experiment. Those three machines. And by the time they got around to a supplementary order, Gilbert & Sands no longer existed."

"Those three machines, do you know their whereabouts?"

He gave the sugar in his coffee cup a few stirs, then scratched fervently at his earlobe.

"One machine went to a small game center in Shinjuku. The game center folded the winter before last. The whereabouts of the machine, unknown."

"That much I know."

"Another machine went to a game center in Shibuya. That burned down last spring Granted, they had fire insurance and nobody took a loss. Only

another 'Spaceship' vanished from the face of the earth. No two ways about it, it's an ill-fated machine."

"It's starting to sound like the Maltese Falcon," I said.

He nodded. "And as to the whereabouts of the third machine, I have no idea."

I gave the address and telephone number of J's Bar. "But it's no longer there. Got rid of it last summer.

He meticulously made a memo in his notebook.

"The machine I'm interested in was the one in Shinjuku," I said. "You really have no idea where it went?"

"There are several possibilities. The most obvious being scrap. The turnover of machines is quite fast. Your ordinary machine depreciates in three years to where a new machine is more economical than repairs. Of course, there's the question of what's in style. That's why some things get scrapped. A second possibility is that it gets traded in as used equipment. Old models that are still usable get passed around from hand to hand, and wind up in some dive, where they end their days at the mercy of drunks and amateurs. Then third, in extremely rare cases, an enthusiast might get hold of it. But eighty percent of the time, it's the scrapheap."

I scissored an unlit cigarette between my fingers, and thought myself into a dark mood

"About that last possibility, any way to check up on something like that?"

"Couldn't fault you for trying, but it'd be difficult. Hardly any contact between enthusiasts. No registers, no official society organs but hell, we'll see what we can do. I myself have some interest in the 'Spaceship'."

"Much obliged."

He sank back deep in his chair, and puffed on his cigarette.

"Just out of curiosity, what was your best score on the 'Spaceship'?"

"A hundred and sixty-five thousand," I said.

"Now that's impressive," he said with not the least change of expression. "Really quite impressive." Then he scratched his ear again.

18

The following week or so my mood was strangely languid and serene. Pinball still echoed in my ears a bit, but that fitful buzzing like the beating wings of a bee marooned in a patch of winter sunlight had all but vanished. Autumn took on greater depth with each passing day, and the woods around the golf course dropped their load of dry leaves on the ground. From the apartment window you could see piles of burning leaves here and there on the rolling suburban hills, smoke snaking up into the sky like magic ropes.

Little by little, the twins grew silent, then subtly sad. We'd take our walks, drink coffee, listen to records, cling to one another under the blankets, and sleep. On Sunday we walked an hour to the arboretum, and ate mushroom-and-spinach sandwiches amidst the oaks. While in the treetops, black-tailed wild birds sang clear and pure.

Little by little, the air was growing chilly, so I bought two new sports shirts for them, and gave them some old sweaters of mine. Hence they ceased to be 208 and 209, and became Olive Green Crewneck Sweater and Beige Cardigan, though neither complained. Besides that, I bought them socks and new sneakers. I felt like a regular sugar daddy.

The October rains were a thing to behold. Needle-fine and soft as cotton, coming down uniformly over the golf course turf that was just beginning to wither. No puddles formed, the rainwater sank slowly into the earth. After the rains, the woods were heavy with the smell of damp fallen leaves, and a few slanting rays of the setting sun would trace a dappled pattern on the ground. Birds raced across the paths through the woods.

Days at the office passed more or less the same.

I'd listen to cassette tapes of old jazz — Bix Beiderbecke, Woody Herman, Bunny Berrigan – while crossing the pass over mountains of work, smoking cigarettes to keep up a leisurely pace, having a shot of whiskey every other hour, eating cookies.

Only the office girl kept up a harried pace, checking schedules, making airplane and hotel reservations, darning two more of my sweaters, and

putting new metal buttons on my blazer for good measure. She changed her hairstyle, changed her lipstick to a pale pink, wore thin sweaters that showed off her bustline. It all blended into the autumn weather.

It was a great week, one to be remembered for all eternity.

19

It was hard breaking the news to J that he was leaving town. The Rat didn't know why it was so hard.

Three days in a row he went to the bar, and not once in those three days could he bring himself to broach the subject. Each time he'd get up the nerve to tell him, his throat would get all dry, and he'd drown it in beer. Weak-willed, he kept on drinking.

You keep on floundering, thought the Rat, and never get anywhere.

When the clock struck twelve, the Rat could only stand up, somewhat relieved, say his good-night to J the same as always, and leave. The night breeze had gotten positively cold. He returned to his apartment, sat down on the bed, and idly watched television. He opened a can of beer and smoked a cigarette. An old western with Robert Taylor, then a commercial, weather report, commercial, static.

The Rat turned off the television, got in the shower. Then he opened another can of beer and smoked another cigarette.

He had no idea where to go once he left this town. He felt like he had no place to go.

For the first time in his life, fears crept up from deep inside him. Fears like dark, shiny crawly things from underground. Without eyes, without the least endearing quality. The Rat was dragging himself underground just like them. He felt their slime all over his body. He opened a can of beer.

Over those three days the Rat's apartment had become littered with empty beer cans and cigarette butts. He wanted to see the woman real bad. Wanted to feel the warmth of her skin all over, to be inside her forever. But you'll never go back to her place. Done burnt that bridge, thought the Rat, haven't you now, over that door, sealed yourself off.

The Rat gazed out at the beacon. The sky was getting light, the sea was beginning to turn gray. And by the time the crisp morning light had swept away the darkness like you'd brush off a tablecloth, the Rat had climbed into bed and fallen asleep with pains that had no place to go.

* * *

The Rat's decision to leave town seemed to have firmed up, at least for the time being. It was a conclusion reached after long hours of looking at things from every angle. It seemed impenetrable.

He struck a match, and ignited the bridge. There went the last of anything left kicking around in his heart, though maybe something of himself would be left in town. Not that anyone would notice. And as the town changed, even that trace would vanish.

Everything would go on regardless.

Now to tell J.

The Rat couldn't figure out why the guy's presence should disturb him as much as it did. A quick, Hey, I'm leaving town, take care, and that would do it. It's not like they knew a thing about each other, after all. Total strangers, just happened to be passing by, that was all. Even so, the Rat's heart ached. Lying face up on the bed, he shook a tightly clenched fist in the air.

* * *

It was past midnight Monday when the Rat pushed up the shutters to J's Bar. There sat J at a table in the half-darkened interior, the same as usual, doing little other than smoking a cigarette. J smiled and nodded when he saw the Rat come in. J looked ages old in the dim light. A stubble shadowed his cheeks and chin, his eyes bulged, his thin lips were cracked and dry. Veins stood out on his neck, and his fingertips were stained yellow with nicotine.

"Tired, eh?" the Rat asked.

"Kind of," J replied, then paused. "One of those days. Everyone has 'em."

The Rat nodded and drew up a chair at the table, sitting himself down across from J.

"Like the song says, rainy days and Mondays always get ya down."

"Ain't it the truth," said J, staring at the cigarette between his fingers.

"You ought to beat a path home and get some sleep."

"Nah, it's okay," J shook his head slowly, as if shooing away bugs. "Get back home and I wouldn't be able to sleep well anyway."

The Rat glanced down at his watch out of sheer reflex. Twelve twenty. There in that deathly quiet dim basement, time itself seemed to have passed away. In J's Bar with the shutters down, there was not a glimmer of the cheer he had sought here for so many years. Everything was faded, everything was tired out.

"Could you get me a cola?" J said. "And while you're at it, grab yourself a beer."

The Rat stood up, took a beer and a cola from the refrigerator, and brought them over to the table along with glasses.

"Music?" asked J.

"Nah, let's keep it quiet tonight," said the Rat.

"Like some kind of funeral."

The Rat laughed. Then, without a word, the two of them drank. The ticking of the Rat's wristwatch on the table began to sound unnaturally loud.

Twelve thirty-five. Yet it seemed as if an awfully long time had passed. J hardly moved. The Rat fixed his eyes on J's filterless cigarette burning up in the glass ashtray, even the stub turning to ash.

"Why're you so tired?" the Rat asked.

"You got me," J said, then rearranged his legs in afterthought. "Doubt there's any reason, really."

The Rat sighed and drank half the beer in his glass, then returned it to the table.

"Say J, I've been thinking, people – I don't care who – all get to rotting. Am I right?"

"Right enough."

"And there are many ways to rot." The Rat unconsciously brought the back of his hand up to his lips. "But for each person, it seems like the options are very limited. At the most say, two or three.

"I guess you could say that."

The last of the beer, foam gone flat, left a pool at the bottom of the glass. The Rat took a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, and put the last one to his lips. "But y'know, lately I've begun to think, it's all the same to me. You're just gonna rot anyway, right?" J reserved comment, his glass of cola poised mid-sip while listening to the Rat.

"People go through changes, sure. But up to now, I never did get what those changes were supposed to mean." The Rat bit his lip and looked down at the table pensively. "Then it came to me. Whatever step forward, whatever the change, it's really only a stage of decay. Does that sound so off target?"

"No, not so very off."

"That's why I never felt the least scrap of love or goodwill toward the run of the mill people who go merrily about their way to oblivion not even in this town."

J said nothing. The Rat said nothing. He struck a match on the table, and after letting the flame slowly burn its way down the shaft, he lit his cigarette.

"The thing is," J said, "you yourself are thinking about making a change, correct?"

"Well, as matter of fact…"

A frightfully quiet few seconds passed between them. Maybe even ten seconds. Then J spoke up.

"People, you gotta remember, are surprisingly hit-or-miss creatures. Far more than even you're thinking."

The Rat emptied the rest of the beer into his glass, and downed it in one gulp. "I'm torn, what to do."

J nodded.

"No way to decide."

"I kinda figured that," said J with a tired, talked-out smile.

The Rat slowly stood up, and stuffed his cigarettes and lighter in his pocket. The clock read past one.

"Good night," said the Rat.

"Good night," said J. "Oh, and one last thing. Somebody said it: Walk slowly and drink lots of water."

The Rat smiled at J, opened the door, and climbed the stairs. Streetlamps brightly illuminated the deserted street. The Rat sat down on a guard-rail and looked up at the sky. And thought, just how much water does a guy have to drink?

20

The Spanish lecturer called on a Wednesday after a holiday weekend in November. My partner had gone off to the bank before lunch, and I was eating spaghetti the office girl had made in the apartment's dining-kitchen. The spaghetti wasn't bad, tossed with slivered *shiso* leaf in place of basil. A scant two minutes overcooked perhaps. We were locked in debate over the issue of spaghetti preparation when the telephone rang. The girl picked up the phone, exchanged two or three words, and then handed it over to me with a shrug.

"About the 'Spaceship'," he said. "I've located one."

"Where?"

"It's a little hard to say over the phone," he said.

And for a brief while, we both fell silent.

"You mean to say?" I puzzled.

"I mean that it's difficult to explain over the phone."

"One look tells all, eh?"

"No," he said, swallowing. "I mean, even if it stood before your very eyes, it'd be difficult to explain."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I waited for him to continue.

"I'm not trying to be mysterious and I'm not just carrying on. In any case, might we get together?"

"Sure."

"Shall we say, today at five?"

"Fine," I agreed. "By the way, will I get to play?"

"Of course," he said. I thanked him and hung up. Then I started in on seconds of spaghetti.

"Where're you going?"

"I'm off to play pinball. I don't know the location."

"Pinball?"

"You got it, batting balls with flippers."

"I know what pinball is. But really, why?"

"There are – how do you say – things in this world our philosophy cannot account for."

She leaned on the table and propped her head up to think it over.

"You're good at pinball, are you?"

"Used to be. The one and only accomplishment I ever took pride in."

"I don't have any."

"Then you don't have any to lose."

While she gave that some more thought, I polished off the rest of the spaghetti.

"Little meaning is there to the things one loses. The glory of things meant to be lost is not true glory. Or so they say."

"Who said that?"

"I forget. But, anyway, it fits."

"Is there anything in the world that doesn't get lost?"

"I'd like to believe so. You'd do well to believe it, too."

"I'll try."

"Maybe I'm too much of an optimist. But I'm not that stupid."

"I know."

"I'm not proud of it, but it sure beats the other way around."

She nodded. "So you're off to play pinball tonight?"

"Uh-huh."

"Hold up your hands."

I raised both hands up toward the ceiling, while she carefully inspected the underarms of my sweater.

"Okay, off you go."

* * *

I rendezvoused with the Spanish lecturer at the coffee shop where we'd first met, and we caught a taxi straight away. Head up Meiji Boulevard, he said. Once the taxi was off and running, he took out a cigarette and lit up, then offered one to me.

He was wearing a gray suit and a blue tie with three diagonal stripes. His shirt was also blue, a shade lighter than the tie. I wore a gray sweater over blue jeans, and my scuffed up desert boots. I felt like a failing student who'd been summoned to the teachers' room.

When the taxi crossed Waseda Boulevard, the driver asked if he should go on further. To Meijiro Boulevard, said the instructor. And the taxi continued a while, then turned onto Meijiro Boulevard.

"Is it pretty far still?" I asked.

"Yes, pretty far," he said. He searched out a second cigarette. For the time being, I watched the passing storefronts.

"I had a hell of a time finding it," he said. "First, I went right through my list of insiders. Twenty of them, twenty fanatics. And not just in Tokyo, but nationwide. But I came up with exactly zero. Nobody knew any more than I did. Next, I tried some companies who deal in used machines. Not too many of them. But it was a lot of work going over the lists of all the machines they've handled. The numbers are overwhelming."

I nodded, as I watched him light his cigarette.

"Thank goodness I had an idea of a time frame. Around February 1971, that is. So I had them look it up. Gilbert & Sands, 'Spaceship,' Serial No. 16509. There it was: February 3, 1971, Waste Treatment."

"'Waste Treatment'?"

"Scrap. Like in *Goldfinger*, you know, the way they crush things down to a compact block to be recycled or dumped in the harbor?"

"But you said…"

"Hold on and just listen. I gave up, thanked the dealer, and headed home. But, you know, something bothered me deep down. Call it a hunch. No, not even that. The next day, I went back to the dealer. Then I went to the metal scrapyard. I watched them working for maybe thirty minutes, then went into the office and presented my card. A university lecturer's calling card carries some weight for people who don't have any idea what it really means."

He spoke a tiny bit faster than he had the time before. And for some reason, I felt a little ill at ease.

"Then I told them I was writing a book, and I needed to know about the scrap business.

"The guy was very cooperative, but he didn't know a thing about any February 1971 pinball machine. Naturally not. That was two and a half years ago, after all, and besides, they don't check each thing out one by one. It's just haul 'em in, and-crunch-it's-all-over. So I just asked one more thing.

Suppose there was, say, a washing machine or a bike chassis that I wanted. Would you let it go if the price were right?' Sure thing, he told me. And I asked, has it ever happened?"

The autumn dusk drew to a swift close, and darkness began to overtake the road. The taxi was heading into the outlying suburbs.

"If I wanted particulars, I should go ask the supervisor upstairs. So of course, I went upstairs and asked Like, had anyone taken any pinball machines off their hands around 1971? Yes, he said. And when I asked what sort of person that might have been, he gave me a telephone number. It seems they'd been requested to give a call any time a pinball machine came in. It was some kind of lead. So I asked him, about how many pinball machines had this person taken off their hands?

"Well now, he said, there were ones the client'd take on sight, and others not. Couldn't really say, this guy. But when I asked him for just a rough estimate, he told me not less than fifty machines."

"Fifty machines?" I exploded.

"That's the person we are going to visit," he said.

21

Everything was immersed in darkness. Not just a monotone black, but smeared on butter-thick in paints of all colors.

I kept my face glued to the taxi window looking at that darkness. It looked strangely flat, like the cut surface of some unreal material sliced off with a razor-sharp blade. A queer kind of perspective prevailed in that darkness. A gigantic night bird had spread its wings to sweep right past my eyes. The further we went, the more spread out were the patches of dwellings, until finally we found ourselves amidst fields and woods that resounded with hosts of chirping insects. The low-lying clouds were as still as rocks, and out in the darkness everything hung its head in silence. Only the sound of the insects that swarmed over the ground could be heard.

Not another word passed between the Spanish lecturer and myself, and we took turns smoking cigarettes. Even the taxi driver had a smoke while he squinted at the oncoming headlights. Unconsciously, I tapped my fingers on my lap. The taxi kept up its momentum, on and on, so long that from time to time I just wanted to push open the door and escape.

Switch-panels, sandboxes, golf courses, reservoirs, darned sweaters, and now pinball: how far did I have to take things? At this rate, I was going to wind up holding a hand of odd cards that would never add up. More than anything, I just wanted to go home. Take a quick bath, have a beer, and sink into my warm bed with my cigarettes and Kant.

Why did I have to be racing on and on through the dark? Fifty pinball machines was too ridiculous. Must be dreaming. And a pretty farfetched dream at that.

Yet the three-flipper "Spaceship" still called to me.

* * *

The Spanish lecturer told the driver to stop in the middle of an open space five hundred yards off the road. The lot was flat, spread out like a

sand-bank with knobs of soft grass. I got out of the car, stretched, and took a deep breath. By the smell, there were chicken farms nearby. Not a houselight as far as you could see. The lights of the road hovered a ways off. The sound of countless insects hemmed us in. I felt as if I were going to be dragged off by my feet somewhere.

We kept quiet until our eyes grew accustomed to the dark.

"Is this still Tokyo?" I asked.

"Of course. Where did you think we were?"

"At the edge of the world."

The Spanish lecturer nodded with an anything-you-say sort of expression, but didn't speak. We smoked our cigarettes, taking in the smell of the grass and chicken shit. Our smoke drifted low across the ground like fox fire.

"Over there you'll find a chicken-wire fence." He pointed into the darkness, arm held straight out target-practice style. I strained my eyes for a sign of the wire fence.

"You walk straight along the fence for three hundred yards until you come to a warehouse."

"A warehouse?"

He nodded without looking in my direction. "A big warehouse, you can't miss it. It used to be the cold storage for a chicken farm. But it's no longer used. The chicken farm went under."

"But it still smells like chickens," I said.

"Oh, the smell? It's soaked into the ground. It's even worse on a rainy day. You'd expect to hear wings flapping."

I couldn't make out anything at the end of the fence. Only a consuming darkness. Even the sound of the insects was starting to get to me.

"The doors to the warehouse should be open. The owner will have left them ajar. Inside you'll find the machine you're after."

"You've been inside?"

"Only once I asked to look inside," he said, puffing away at his cigarette. A point of glowing orange bobbed in the dark. "The light switch is just inside the doors on your right as you enter. Watch out for the steps."

"You're not coming with me?"

"Please go alone. It was part of the agreement."

"Agreement?"

He tossed his cigarette down on the grass and carefully stamped it out. "That's right. You were invited to take as long as you like. Only you should please turn our the lights when you leave."

The air was gradually turning chill. The cool of the grass was coming up all around us.

"Did you meet the owner?"

"I did."

"What sort of character is he?"

The instructor shrugged, took a handkerchief out of his pocket, and blew his nose. "No outstanding characteristics to speak of. At least nothing striking."

"And the reason for collecting fifty pinball machines?"

"Well, it takes all kinds. What more can I say?"

There had to be more to it than that. Nonetheless, I thanked him and set out to walk alone along the fence of the chicken farm. There had to be more to it. There's a slight difference between collecting fifty wine labels and collecting fifty pinball machines.

The warehouse crouched like a waiting animal.

There it stood in the densely packed undergrowth of tall grass, a featureless blank gray wall with not a single window. A gloomy edifice. Over the iron doors, a name, probably of the chicken farm, had been obscured by daubs of white paint.

I cased the building from ten paces away. No matter how hard I thought, nothing particularly brilliant came to mind. I gave up the attempt, and just walked in with a push on the chilly iron doors.

They opened without a sound, revealing before me a different breed of darkness.

22

I flicked the switch, and after a few seconds the overhead fluorescent lamps blinked on, flooding the warehouse with white light. There must have been all of a hundred fluorescent lamps. The warehouse was much bigger than it had appeared from the outside, but even so the amount of light was oppressive. I shut my eyes against the glare. A minute later when I opened them again, the darkness had retreated, only the silence and chill remained.

The warehouse looked like the inside of a huge refrigerator, but considering its original purpose, that should hardly have come as a surprise. The ceiling and windowless walls had been painted gloss white, but were all stained yellow and black and colors. I couldn't relate to anything. One look told you the walls were built thick and solid. Like being packed in a lead box. Suddenly, claimed by the fear that I might never get out of there, I turned around to check and recheck the doors. It'd be hard to imagine a more disturbing structure.

The kindest thing you could have said about the place was that it was reminiscent of an elephants' graveyard. But instead of the whitened skeletons of elephants with legs collapsed under them, the concrete floor was covered as far as the eye could see with rows of pinball machines. I stood at the top of some steps, staring down on this strange scene. My hand crawled up to my mouth of its own will, then returned to my pocket.

The sheer number of machines was overwhelming. Seventy-eight to be exact. I took the time to count them over and over again. Seventy-eight, no mistake. Eight columns of machines were lined up and facing me, each column extending all the way to the back wall. It was as if chalk guidelines had been drawn on the floor; the columns were not an inch off. The whole place was as motionless as a fly sealed in acrylic. Not the slightest hint of movement. Seventy-eight deaths and seventy-eight silences. My only reflex was to move. If I didn't, I felt as if I too would have been counted in with these gargoyles.

Cold. That and the smell of dead chickens.

I slowly walked down the five narrow concrete steps. It was even colder at the bottom. The place gave me the creeps and I began to sweat. I took a

handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped off the sweat, though I couldn't do a thing about the sweat that had poured from my armpits. I sat down on the bottom step and smoked a cigarette, my hands trembling.

My three-flipper "Spaceship" – I hadn't wanted to meet her like this. And the same held for her probably.

After closing the doors, you couldn't even hear any insects chirping. The perfect silence blanketed the floor like fog. The seventy-eight pinball machines planted their three hundred twelve legs firmly on the floor, patiently bearing up their immovable weight. A sorry scene.

I sat there and whistled the first four bars of "Jumping with Symphony Sid," Stan Getz with the Head Shaking and Foot Tapping Rhythm Section.

My whistling echoed magnificently in the unobstructed emptiness of that refrigerator. I began to feel a little better, and whistled the next four bars. Then the next four. I felt as if every machine had its ears pricked to listen. Though, of course, none turned around to look, nor tapped a foot. My whistling simply died away, absorbed into the far corners of the warehouse.

"Awful cold," I muttered after having finished my whistling session. The echo didn't sound like my voice. It bounced off the ceiling and came down like mist across the floor. I couldn't sit here putting on a one-man show forever. Sitting motionless, I felt as if the chill would penetrate to the bone, and I would be soaked through and through with the smell of chickens. I stood up and brushed the cool dirt off my trousers. Then I ground out my cigarette beneath the heel of my shoe, and tossed it into a nearby tin can.

Pinball, pinball. Isn't that why I came here?

The cold was putting a damper on me. Think: It's pinball, right? Seventy-eight pinball machines. Okay, the switch. Somewhere in this building there's got to be an electric switch to bring these seventy-eight machines back to life. A switch, so find it.

I thrust both hands in the pockets of my jeans, and slowly began to walk the inside perimeters of the building. Here and there on the seamless walls hung ripped-out wires and lead pipes from the time when the building had been used for cold storage. Meters and junction boxes and switches had all been gouged out of the walls by brute force, leaving crater-sized holes. The walls were much slimier than they appeared at a distance. Like a giant slug had crawled all over them. It was a monster of a building when you actually

started walking around the place. Unbelievably large for one chicken farm's refrigerated warehouse.

Directly opposite the steps I had come down was another set of steps. And at the top of those steps, identical iron doors. So identical that I thought for a moment that I'd done one complete lap around the building. I pushed on the doors tentatively, but they didn't budge a hair. No bolts or locks, yet they betrayed not the slightest sign of motion. It was as if they were painted shut. I withdrew my hand from the door, and without thinking about it, wiped the sweat from my brow. The smell of chickens.

The switch was beside the doors. A big old throw-switch. I threw the switch and all at once the whole floor started to rumble. The sound sent a shiver up my spine. Next, there followed an outrageous fluttering like tens of thousands of birds flapping their wings. I turned around and looked out over the refrigerated warehouse. It was the sound of seventy-eight pinball machines drinking in electricity, their scoreboards clicking down the thousands to zero. After the commotion settled down, only a piercing electric hum like a swarm of bees lingered on. In no time at all, that warehouse full of seventy-eight pinball machines had come to life. The playing field of each and every machine flashed with bright colored lights, the boards all bursting with their respective dream images.

I walked down the steps, and slowly paced the aisles between the seventy-eight pinball machines, a general reviewing his troops. A number were vintage machines I'd only seen in photographs, a number were models familiar to me from the game center. Then there were machines that time had forgotten, the likes of which I'd never seen. What was the name of that astronaut, painted on the board of this Williams' "Friendship 7"? 'Glenn'? Early sixties. A Bally "Grand Tour" with its blue sky, Eiffel Tower, happy American traveler. "Kings and Queens," a model with eight roll-over lanes. A beautifully mustached, crewcut, nonchalant-looking Western gambler, with an ace hidden behind his spur.

Super heroes, monsters, college girls, football, rockets, and women – all worn-out and faded dreams that had done their time in game centers.

These heroes and women smiled at me from their boards. Blondes, platinum blondes, brunettes, red-heads, raven-tressed Mexican girls, Ann-Margaret, Audrey Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe – every one of them pridefully heaving an awesome pair of breasts. Some from underneath sheer blouses unbuttoned to the waist, some from under one-piece bathing suits, some

from beneath the pointy tips of brassieres, breasts never losing their shape, but faded all the same. Their lamps kept flashing in time with their heartbeats. Seventy-eight pinball machines, a graveyard of old, old dreams beyond recall. I threaded my way past these old girls.

The three-flipper "Spaceship" waited for me at the far end of the row. She was lined up between more gaudily made-up numbers, looking awfully demure. Like she'd been sitting on a flat stone in a clearing in the forest, just waiting for me. I stood there in front of her looking at the familiar board.

Deep blue space, a spilled-ink ultramarine. And in it, tiny white stars: Saturn, Venus, Mars, while in front floated a pure white spaceship. The portals of the spaceship were lit up, and inside a family gathering appeared to be in progress. A few shooting stars trailed glowing lines through the darkness.

The field was just as I remembered. The same dark blue. The targets smiled bright white toothy grins. Ten raised star-shaped bonus lights slowly pulsed with a lemon yellow glow. The two kick-out holes were Saturn and Venus, and the lotto target, Mars. Stillness permeated everything.

So how's tricks, I said. Or maybe I didn't say it. But in any case, I laid my hand on the glass top.

Cold as ice, it clouded over from the heat of my hand, leaving the white outline of ten fingers. Only then did she recognize me and smile up in my direction. It was a smile just like old times. I smiled, too.

It seems so long, she said. I feigned a preoccupied look, and flexed my fingers. Three years it'd been.

Like no time at all.

We nodded to each other, then fell into a hush. If it had been a coffee shop, we'd have sipped our coffee and fingered the lace curtains.

Been thinking about you, I said, and I've been feeling just miserable.

Sleepless nights?

Sleepless nights, I concurred. She never stopped smiling at me the whole while.

You're not cold? I asked.

Sure I'm cold, awful cold. You really shouldn't stay too long; then I just know it's too cold for you.

Probably so, I answered. My fingers trembled slightly as I pulled out a cigarette. I lit up and breathed in the smoke.

You're not going to play a game? she asked.

Nope, I answered.

Why not?

One hundred and sixty-five thousand, my best score. You remember?

I remember. It was my best score, too.

I don't want to tarnish it, I said.

She was silent. Only the ten bonus lights kept pulsing on and off. I looked down at my feet while I smoked.

Why did you come here?

You called me.

I did? She was puzzled, then smiled shyly. Yes, I guess that's true. Maybe I did call you.

I looked all over for you.

Thanks, she said. Talk to me.

You know, a lot of things have changed, I said. Your old game center is now an all-night doughnut shop. They serve the worst coffee.

That bad?

You remember a long time ago, in those Disney animal films, the zebras would be dying of thirst and they'd come upon this muddy waterhole? It's that color.

She giggled, a beautiful little laugh. What a horrible town, she said, in her normal voice Everything's so crude, filthy.

Them's the times.

She nodded. So tell me, what you been up to?

Doing translation work.

Novels?

Nah, I said, your day-to-day sludge. Pouring it from one gutter into another. That's all.

You don't enjoy your work?

Hmm, never thought about it.

And girls?

You probably won't believe me, but I'm living with twins now. They make great coffee.

She burst into a big smile, and looked off into space. It's all so strange. It's like nothing ever really happened.

No, it really happened, only it's gone.

Taking it hard?

Nah, I shook my head, things that come out of nowhere go back to nowhere, that's all.

We fell silent again. The thing we had shared was nothing more than a fragment of time that had died long ago. Even so, a faint glimmer of that warm memory still claimed a part of my heart. And when death claimed me, no doubt I would walk along by that faint light in the brief instant before being flung once again into the abyss of nothingness.

You'd better be going, she said.

The chill was getting unbearable, to be sure. I shook all over as I stomped out my cigarette.

Thanks for coming to see me, she said. We may not meet again, but take care.

Thanks, I said, farewell.

I left the ranks of pinball machines, climbed the steps, and threw the switch. The electricity went out of all the pinball machines like air out of a balloon, and a sleep of perfect silence fell over the place. I walked back across the warehouse, climbed the steps, switched off the lights, and shut the doors behind me. I didn't look back once the whole time. Not once did I look back.

* * *

It was a little before midnight when the taxi delivered me to my apartment. The twins were sitting in bed finishing up a crossword puzzle in a magazine. I looked pale, and my entire body gave off the smell of frozen chicken. I stuffed all the clothes I'd been wearing into the washing machine, and soaked in a hot bath. It took thirty minutes in the hot water before I was back to ordinary human consciousness, but I still hadn't completely gotten rid of the chill deep inside.

The twins dragged a gas heater out of the closet and lit it. After fifteen minutes I stopped shaking, took a deep breath, and heated up a can of onion soup.

"I'm all right now," I said.

"Really?"

"You still feel cold," worried one twin, feeling my wrist.

"I'll warm up quick."

Then I sank into bed, filled in the last two items in the crossword puzzle. One was "rainbow trout," the other "trail." My body soon warmed up, and we fell into a deep sleep pretty much together.

I dreamed about Trotsky's four reindeer. All four reindeer were wearing red wool socks. It was an awfully cold dream.

23

The Rat no longer saw the woman. He gave up looking at the lights of her room, too. Something in his being drifted a while in the dark, then vanished, like the coil of white smoke that rises from a candle when it's blown out. Then came a dark silence.

Silence. Peeling away layer by layer until what remained? Even the Rat didn't know. Pride? He lay on his bed looking from one hand to the other. A person probably couldn't live without pride. But living by pride alone, the prospects were too dark.

Way too dark.

Breaking up with the woman was simple. One Friday night he just didn't call her up. And that was that. She might have waited until midnight for his call. Thinking about this made it harder for him.

He felt his hand reaching for the telephone any number of times, but he controlled the urge. He put on headphones, and listened to records with the volume turned up. He knew she wouldn't call, but all the same he found himself wishing the phone would ring.

She waited until twelve, then probably gave up.

She washed her face, brushed her teeth, and crawled into bed. And thought, he's going to call tomorrow morning, for sure. Then she turned out the light, and slept.

But Saturday morning, the phone does not ring.

She opens the windows, eats breakfast, waters the potted plants. She waits until noon, then gives up once and for all. Brushing her hair in front of the mirror, she strikes a smile now and again, as if in practice. Then she thinks to herself that she knew this was going to happen.

All this time the Rat spent in his apartment with the blinds drawn tight, watching the hands of an electric clock on the wall. The air in the room was unbelievably still. A shallow sleep overcame him now and again. The hands on the clock ceased to mean anything. Everything drifted back and forth between different shades of darkness. The Rat saw his own body lose its

physical presence, grow heavier, then become numb. How many hours, how many goddamn hours have I been sitting here like this, the Rat wondered. With every breath, the wall slowly pulsed before his very eyes. Space took on a density that began to permeate his body.

He had reached the point where he figured he couldn't hold out any longer. He stood up, took a shower, and shaved in a daze. He toweled dry, and drank some orange juice from the refrigerator. He changed into a new pair of pajamas, and climbed back into bed, thinking, that's over and done.

Then a deep sleep came over him. An awfully deep sleep.

24

"I'm leaving town," the Rat announced. He was trimming his nails into an ashtray with a nail-clipper he'd borrowed from J.

Six o'clock in the evening, the bar had just opened. The counter was freshly waxed, not a single cigarette butt in any ashtray on the premises.

The liquor bottles were polished and lined up with their labels facing out, small tabletop trays decked out with brand-new paper napkins folded to a sharp point, bottles of tabasco sauce, and salt shakers. J was mixing up three kinds of dressing in little bowls, and a faint garlic odor drifted through the room. A brief moment in the routine of setting up for the night.

"Leaving where to?"

"Dunno. Some town, someplace. Not too big, probably."

J poured the dressings into three large flasks through a funnel. He put them in the refrigerator and dried his hands on a towel.

"What you going to do there?"

"Work." The Rat kept glancing down at the nails of his right hand while he finished the trim-job.

"Can't do that in this town?"

"Nope," the Rat said. "I could do with a beer, though."

"It's on me."

"Much obliged."

The Rat slowly poured the beer into a glass that had been chilling on ice, then drank half of it in one gulp. "Aren't you going to ask me why this town won't do?"

"No, I kinda think I know."

The Rat smiled, then clicked his tongue. "Nice try, J, but really, if everybody went around understanding each other without asking questions or speaking their mind, they'd never get anywhere. Not that I really ought to be saying this, but it seems like I've stayed too long in that state already."

"Maybe so," said J, after a moment's thought.

The Rat took another sip of beer, then began to trim the nails of his left hand. "I've given it a lot of thought. And you know, maybe it's all the same,

no matter where I end up going. Still, I gotta go. All the same's good enough."

"You're not coming back then?"

"Of course I'll be back. Sometime. It's not like I'm running away."

The Rat scooped some peanuts from a small dish, tossing their wrinkled shells into an ashtray as he ate. He wiped off the hinged section of counter top where the beer's chill had left a clouded ring on the brightly waxed surface.

"When are you thinking about making your move?"

"Tomorrow, the next day. Don't know. Probably within three days, though."

"Mighty quick decision."

"Uh-huh. Given you plenty of trouble in my time, I figure."

"Been through plenty together, haven't we? J nodded, wiping down the row of glasses on the shelf with a dry cloth. "But when it's all over, it'll seem like a dream."

"Could be, but I bet it'll take an extra long time before I get to that point."

J was silent a bit, then he laughed.

"Maybe so. You know, sometimes I plum forget there's twenty years' difference between us."

The Rat emptied the rest of the beer into his glass, and drank it slowly. The first time ever he'd drunk beer so slowly.

"What say to another beer?"

The Rat shook his head. "Nah, that's okay. I meant this to be my last. The last beer I drink here, that is."

"You're not coming back then?"

"Don't intend to. It'd be too hard on me."

J laughed. "I hope our paths cross again sometime."

"Bet you the next time our paths cross you don't recognize me on sight."

"I'll catch the scent."

The Rat gave his neatly trimmed fingers on both hands the once-over, swept the remaining peanuts into his pocket, wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, then stood up to leave.

* * *

The breeze glided noiselessly over the face of the dark, slipping down unseen, stratum by stratum. It tussled the treetops overhead, periodically shaking down a shower of leaves which fell on top of the car with a dry rustle, danced aimlessly about the roof, and slid down the slanting windshield, before piling up on the wipers.

All alone in the woods of the cemetery, the Rat sat blankly staring through the windshield. A yard in front of his car, the ground dropped away into an expanse of dark skies and sea and night streets.

The Rat leaned forward with both hands on the steering wheel, and was perfectly still, his gaze fixed on a point in the heavens. He held an unlit cigarette between his fingers, tracing a series of complex though meaningless designs in the air with its tip.

As soon as he'd finished talking to J, he was overcome by an unbearably vacuous feeling. Diverse streams of consciousness he'd barely managed to assemble into one self seemed to have suddenly gone their separate ways. The Rat had no idea how long it would take before these streams merged again. They all seemed like dark rivulets destined to flow into a vast ocean. They might not even meet up again. Twenty-five years just to come to this, and for what? the Rat asked himself. Don't know.

Good question, but no answer. Good questions never have answers.

The breeze began to pick up. Whatever bit of warmth arose from the human world, the breeze carried it off to some distant place, leaving those countless stars to shine in icy darkness. The Rat released the wheel, and rolled the cigarette around between his lips until it occurred to him to put his lighter to it.

His head ached a little. Not an ache exactly, but a strange sensation more like cold fingertips pressing on both temples. The Rat shook his head, casting off these things he'd been thinking. It was all done with, at least.

He took a book of nationwide roadmaps out of the glove compartment, and slowly turned the pages. He began to read out the listing of towns in order. Most were small towns whose names were new to his ears. Towns strung out along the roads to who knows where. He'd read several pages when a massive sense of fatigue, built up over the last few days, broke over him like a wave. He felt a lukewarm sludge slowly circulating through his veins.

He wanted to sleep.

He felt as if sleep would wipe everything clean.

He had only to sleep.

When he closed his eyes, deep behind his ears he could hear the sound of waves. Wintry waves striking the jetty, threading between the concrete blocks along the shore.

Nothing to explain to anyone any more, thought the Rat. No doubt the bottom of the sea is warmer, more peaceful and quiet than any town. No, why think of anything now, already.

25

The hum of pinball had all but vanished from my life. As had the feeling that I had no place to go.

Not that I've gotten to the big climax, like King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. That was still far in the future. When the steeds were tired, the swords bent, and armor all rusted by time, I would lay myself down in a field of grass to peacefully listen to the wind. It will be all the same to me the bottom of a reservoir or a refrigerated warehouse on a chicken farm, I'll take whatever route I have to.

The only thing I can claim as an epilogue to this interlude in my life is an incident hardly more momentous than a clothesline in the rain.

It's this:

One day, the twins bought a box of cotton swabs. Three hundred swabs to the box, it was. So whenever I finished taking a bath, the twins would sit one on each side of me and simultaneously clean both my ears. The two of them were positively great at cleaning ears. I'd just shut my eyes, and sip beer while listening to the sound of two cotton swabs swishing around in my ears. One night, however, in the midst of the ear-cleaning proceedings I happened to sneeze, and in that instant, I lost almost all hearing in both ears.

"Can you hear my voice?" asked the one on the right.

"Just barely," I said, my own voice seeming to emanate from somewhere inside my nose.

"How about this side?" asked the one on the left.

"The same."

"You just had to sneeze then, didn't you?"

"Of all the stupid things."

I sighed. I felt as if I were being lectured by the two corner bowling pins of a seven-ten split.

"Do you think drinking some water might clear it up?" asked one of them.

"Come off it," I shouted angrily.

Even so, the twins made me drink a whole bucketful of water. All it did was make my stomach feel as if it were going to burst. My ears didn't hurt,

so apparently what had happened was that sneezing had driven earwax way back into my ears. I couldn't think of what else it could be. I pulled two flashlights out of the closet and had the twins take a look. They shone them deep into my ears, and peered for several minutes as if they were looking for cracks where the wind might get through.

"Can't see anything."

"Not a speck."

"Well, then, why can't I hear?" I shouted again.

"Expiration date's up."

"You've gone deaf."

Without asking them anything further, I checked the telephone directory and rang up the nearest ear, nose, and throat clinic. It was next to impossible to hear anything over the phone, although maybe that made the nurse more sympathetic. If I could come right away, she said, she'd leave the front door open. We quickly climbed into some clothes, left the apartment, and walked along the bus route.

The doctor was a woman of about fifty, hair like frayed iron wire, but pleasant enough. She opened the door of the waiting room and clapped her hands to quiet down the twins, then seated me in a chair and asked me without much interest what was wrong with me.

When I finished my explanation, she said that I didn't have to shout any more because she already understood the problem. She took out an enormous needle-less syringe, sucked up a full charge of an amber liquid, and gave me a tin contraption shaped like a megaphone to hold under my ear. She put the syringe in my ear and the amber liquid came rushing into my ear like a herd of zebras, the overflow spilling into the megaphone. After repeating the process three times, she coaxed a thin cotton swab into the depths of my ear. By the time both ears were done, my hearing had returned to normal.

"I can hear," I marveled.

"Earwax," she said succinctly. It sounded like the tail-end of a round of password.

"But I didn't see a thing."

"It's bent."

"Huh?"

"Your ear passage is much more curved than most."

She sketched the inside of my ear on the back of a matchbook. In diagram, it looked like one of those brackets for reinforcing table corners.

"So you see, if a plug of wax rounds the bend, it's beyond recall."

I cleared my throat. "What should I do then?"

"What should you do? Just take care when you clean your ears. C-A-R-E."

"This having abnormally curved ear passages and all, could it have adverse effects on anything?"

"Adverse effects?"

"For example mentally?"

"None," she said.

We took a fifteen-minute detour through the golf course on the way back to the apartment. The dogleg on the eleventh hole reminded me of the insides of my ear, the flag, a cotton swab. And that's not all: clouds ranged across the moon like a squadron of B-52s, dense woods held down the terrain to the west like a fish-shaped paperweight, stars spilled out across the sky like moldy parsley flakes; but enough. My ears were keen in picking out every sound there was to hear I felt as if a veil had been lifted from the world. Miles away night birds were calling, miles away people were shutting windows, miles away lovers whispered sweet nothings.

"Glad that worked out," said one twin.

"Real glad," said the other.

* * *

It's like Tennessee Williams said. The past and the present, we might say, "go like this." The future is a "maybe."

Yet when we look back on the darkness that obscures the path that brought us this far, we only come up with another indefinite "maybe." The only thing we perceive with any clarity is the present moment, and even that just passes by.

That's pretty much what I was thinking as I accompanied the twins to see them off. We cut across the golf course to the bus stop two stops ahead

of ours. I kept silent the whole time Seven o'clock Sunday morning, the sky a piercing blue. The turf underfoot showed a hint of the temporary death that awaited it until spring. Here, in time, would come the frosts and blankets of snow. Then would gleam a crystal clear morning light. We walked on, the sere bleached turf crunching beneath our feet with each step.

"What are you thinking about?" asked one of the twins.

"Nothing," I said.

The twins wore the sweaters I'd given them, and carried their own sweatshirts as their only change of clothes under their arms in paper bags.

"Where you heading?" I asked.

"Back to where we came from."

We crossed the sand trap, crossed the straight eighth-hole fairway, walked down the outdoor escalator. An impressive number of birds watched us from the grass and the chainlink fence.

"I don't really know how to put it," I said, "but I'm going to be really lonesome without you."

"Us too."

"We'll be lonesome."

"But you're set on leaving."

The two of them nodded.

"You honestly have someplace to go?"

"Of course," said one.

"We wouldn't go if we didn't," said the other.

We climbed over the chainlink fence from the golf course, made our way through the woods, and sat down on the bus stop bench to wait for the bus.

That Sunday morning, the bus stop was amazingly still, bathed in soft sunlight. We played a few last rounds of password in that light. For five minutes, until the bus came. And I paid the fares.

"We'll meet again somewhere," I said.

"Let's, somewhere," said one.

"Yes, somewhere," said the other.

The words echoed in my mind a moment.

The bus door banged shut, the twins waved from the window. Everything was repeating itself. I retraced my steps by the exact same route, and sat in the apartment awash with autumn light listening to the copy of "Rubber Soul" the twins had left me. I brewed coffee. And the whole day

through I watched that Sunday pass by my window. A tranquil November Sunday of rare clarity shining through each and every thing.

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